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Jean Monnet
Chair - EUJUSEF

GOLOVATAIA LUDMILA

THE EUROPEAN UNION AND ITS SECURITY IN THE WIDER NEIGHBORHOOD





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Coursebook “The european union and its security in the wider neighborhood” has been developed on the basis of a systematic review of academic literature and official European Union documents. It presents a structured and up-to-date overview of the European Union’s external action with a particular focus on security dynamics in the wider neighbourhood. The publication outlines key concepts and terminology, explains the EU’s institutional and legal framework, and analyses major policy instruments and operational practices in relevant regional contexts. The coursebook is intended for students and teaching staff in European Studies, International Relations, Political Science, Security Studies and related fields, and may also be of interest to practitioners. It supports the learning process by providing thematic chapters, core definitions, guiding questions and bibliographic references, facilitating informed discussion and further independent study.

The content of this coursebook is aligned with contemporary academic standards and draws on the research tradition of leading European centres of expertise. It contributes to the development of teaching and research capacities that, taken together, constitute the European school of European Union studies and the training of professionals in the field of European management.

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INTRODUCTION

This textbook, “The EU and Security in the Wider Neighbourhood”, examines how the European Union has developed from a primarily economic community into a complex international actor with growing responsibilities in the field of peace, security and crisis management. It focuses on the EU’s eastern and southern neighbourhoods – regions where conflicts, state fragility, energy interdependence, migration and geopolitical rivalries directly affect the security of the Union and its citizens. The central idea of the book is that EU security cannot be understood in isolation from its neighbourhood and that the Union’s external policies increasingly combine diplomatic, economic and security instruments in order to stabilise and transform its surrounding environment.

Part I provides the conceptual and institutional foundations. It analyses the evolution of the EU’s external relations from the early decades of the European Communities, through the Cold War, the Maastricht and Lisbon stages, to the current debates on “normative power” and strategic autonomy. It then introduces the main actors, institutions and decision-making procedures of EU foreign and security policy, including the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). Enlargement is presented as a specific form of foreign policy with strong security implications, while a separate topic addresses the external economic dimension of EU power. Finally, the part explores the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and the modalities of the EU’s “Eastern” and “Southern” initiatives, showing how the Union tries to shape its surroundings through differentiated partnerships, regional formats and a mixture of incentives and conditionality.

Part II turns to the Eastern neighbourhood and examines concrete security challenges and the EU’s operational role on the ground. It begins with a mapping of conflicts in the wider European neighbourhood and explains how and why the EU decides to engage in them. The Black Sea region is analysed through the lens of energy security and geopolitical competition, while the topics on EU–Ukraine, EU–Moldova and EU–Belarus relations highlight how association, candidate status, sanctions, hybrid threats and resilience shape security agendas in the East. Throughout this part,

the book links high-level policies with field practices, showing how EU instruments are implemented in conflict and post-conflict settings and how their effectiveness can be assessed.

Part III focuses on the Southern neighbourhood and explores the complex relationship between security, governance and regional order in North Africa and the Middle East. It starts with the overall security dynamics of the region and the EU's strategic approach, then moves to the typology of conflicts and the Union's role as a conflict manager, including cooperation with other international actors. Special attention is given to the Arab–Israel conflict, to terrorism, violence and radicalisation in the Southern neighbourhood, and to the EU's internal and external counter-terrorism policies. The final topics use Syria, Egypt and Libya as detailed case studies that connect crisis management, humanitarian response, migration, maritime security, energy, governance and human rights. These chapters illustrate the dilemmas the EU faces when it tries to balance stability and transformation, short-term risk management and long-term normative ambitions.

The textbook is designed for students of international relations, European studies, security studies and related fields, as well as for practitioners who wish to gain a structured overview of the EU's role in its wider neighbourhood. Each topic combines conceptual explanation with empirical examples and highlights key debates in the academic and policy literature. By the end of the course based on this book, students should not only be familiar with the main policies, instruments and regional cases, but also be able to critically assess the opportunities and limits of the EU as a security actor in its eastern and southern neighbourhoods.

PART I. EU EXTERNAL RELATION

TOPIC 1: EVOLUTION OF EU'S EXTERNAL RELATIONS

- 1.1. *Preconditions and the early stage of the external relations of the European Communities*
- 1.2. *The Cold War and the role of the European Communities in international affairs*
- 1.3. *The Maastricht stage: from external relations to foreign and Security Policy*
- 1.4. *The development of security and defence policy within the evolution of EU external action.*
- 1.5. *The Lisbon Treaty and the move toward a “global” European Union*
- 1.6. *The contemporary stage: from “normative power” to the search for strategic autonomy*

Overall goal is to help students understand how and why the European Union evolved from a mainly economic community into a complex international actor with its own foreign, security and defence policies, and how this evolution is linked to major historical events and changes in the global order.

Expected learning results

After studying Topic 1, students should be able to:

- Explain the main stages in the evolution of EU external relations, from early trade-based external policies to today's broader foreign and security role.
- Identify how key historical moments (Cold War, end of the Cold War, Balkan wars, Lisbon Treaty, recent crises) reshaped the EU's external action.
- Distinguish between economic external relations, Common Foreign and Security Policy, and security and defence policy.
- Assess how the EU combines “soft power” tools (law, trade, norms) with newer security and defence instruments.
- Reflect critically on the idea of the EU as a “normative power” and on the current debate about the Union's strategic autonomy.

Key terms:

External relations

The EU's economic, legal and political interactions with non-EU countries, especially through trade, cooperation and development policies.

Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP)

The framework through which EU member states coordinate their foreign policy positions and take joint decisions on diplomacy, sanctions and security issues.

Security and defence policy

The part of EU external action that deals with crisis management, civilian and military missions, and cooperation on defence capabilities among member states.

Soft power

The ability to influence other actors not by force, but through attractiveness, norms, economic ties, and the promise of cooperation and benefits.

Normative power Europe

A way of describing the EU as an actor that tries to shape the world by promoting its values and rules (democracy, human rights, rule of law) rather than primarily using military tools.

Maastricht Treaty

The 1992 treaty that created the European Union and introduced CFSP, marking the shift from mainly economic "external relations" to a broader foreign and security policy.

Lisbon Treaty

The treaty in force since 2009 that gave the EU a single legal personality and a more coherent structure for external action, helping it act more like a unified global player.

Strategic autonomy

The ambition for the EU to be able to act independently in key areas of foreign, security, economic and technological policy, while still cooperating with allies.

1.1. Preconditions and the early stage of the external relations of the European Communities

When the European integration project started in the 1950s, its founders did not set out to create a full-fledged foreign policy actor. The first communities were primarily economic in nature: they aimed to pool key industries, remove internal barriers, and prevent war through economic interdependence. Yet from the very beginning, this internal economic project had an external side. Trade with the outside world, relations with former colonies, and the broader international climate of the Cold War gradually pushed the European Communities towards a more articulated system of external relations, even before anyone spoke about a “foreign policy” in the strict sense.

Economic integration and external trade were the first and most natural channels through which the Communities developed links with third countries. The European Coal and Steel Community and later the European Economic Community were created to liberalise trade among their members and to build a common market. Once tariffs and quotas were being dismantled internally, it became necessary to define a common approach to tariffs vis-à-vis the rest of the world. A common external tariff and a common commercial policy emerged not only as technical instruments of market integration, but also as a way of speaking with one voice in international trade negotiations. In practical terms, this meant that the Communities negotiated trade agreements collectively, instead of each member state doing so alone. Without using the language of “foreign policy,” the Communities were already projecting power and preferences externally, particularly in the framework of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade.

At the same time, the early European project was deeply shaped by the colonial history of several member states. France, Belgium, the Netherlands, and others had extensive overseas territories and long-standing ties with African, Caribbean, and Pacific regions. When these territories gained independence, the question arose: what would be the nature of their future relationship with the new European market? The answer took the form of a series of association agreements that blended trade preferences with develop-

ment cooperation. The Yaoundé Conventions of the 1960s and the later Lomé Conventions from the 1970s onward offered countries in Africa, the Caribbean, and the Pacific privileged access to the European market, together with financial aid and technical assistance. This model presented the Communities not simply as a trading bloc, but as a particular kind of international partner, combining economic interests with a rhetoric of solidarity and shared development.

Parallel dynamics unfolded in the Mediterranean region. Southern Europe and the southern and eastern shores of the Mediterranean Sea were linked by geography, migration, energy dependence, and historical ties. The Communities concluded a series of agreements with Mediterranean countries that aimed to stabilize their economic relations and create a predictable framework for trade. These agreements were formally technical and sectoral, but in practice, they had clear political implications: they positioned the European Communities as a central economic reference point for neighbouring states and as a pole of attraction in their regional environment.

From the outset, therefore, the external relations of the European Communities were more than a collection of technical trade arrangements. They embodied a particular logic that we can describe as a combination of soft power and economic interdependence. Soft power here does not simply mean “being attractive”. It refers to the ability to shape the preferences and choices of other actors by offering access to a large and stable market, by extending financial support, and by presenting a model of regional cooperation based on rules, predictability and legal commitments. Third countries were not forced to accept European norms; instead, they were encouraged to align with these norms because alignment opened the door to concrete benefits: tariff reductions, export opportunities, investment, and development funds.

Economic interdependence deepened this dynamic. As trade flows grew and supply chains became more intertwined, both the European Communities and their partner countries became mutually dependent. For the Communities, secure access to raw materials, energy and external markets supported internal growth and

employment. For partner countries, the European market became a key outlet for their exports and a significant source of capital and technology. This web of reciprocal interests made the Communities increasingly conscious that what happened beyond their borders could not be treated as a purely external or marginal issue. Political instability, economic crisis or conflict in partner regions could quickly spill over and affect internal objectives such as growth, social cohesion or energy security.

In this early phase, however, there was still a clear separation between economic external relations, handled through the institutions of the Communities, and political or security concerns, which remained largely in the hands of national governments and NATO. The European Communities were, in many respects, a “civilian power”: their main tools were trade agreements, development aid and technical cooperation. Yet through these instruments, they already started to act in a way that resembled foreign policy. By choosing whom to associate with, under what conditions, and with which combination of incentives and obligations, the Communities influenced the development paths of neighbouring states and shaped the broader regional environment.

Looking back, we can see that the prerequisites for a more explicit foreign policy were already present in these early external relations. The internal logic of market integration required a common commercial policy. The colonial legacy and decolonisation processes pushed member states to seek a collective framework for their relations with newly independent countries. The need for stability in the Mediterranean and in other neighbouring regions highlighted the link between economic cooperation and political order. Step by step, external relations moved from the margins to the centre of the European project. What began as “external trade policy” gradually evolved into a broader practice of engagement with third countries, grounded in the belief that economic openness, legal commitments and cooperative frameworks could promote both mutual prosperity and a more predictable international environment.

In simple terms, one can say that the European Communities learned to act externally by doing what they knew best internally:

creating rules, building markets, and using economic instruments to manage interdependence. Before there was a formal common foreign and security policy, there was already a distinctive European way of being present in the world, anchored in trade, development partnerships and the projection of a particular model of regional integration. This early experience would later provide both the foundations and the tensions for the subsequent evolution of the European Union as an international actor with more explicit political and security ambitions.

1.2. The Cold War and the role of the European Communities in international affairs

During the Cold War, the international environment was dominated by the rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union. Security questions, strategic nuclear balance and military alliances set the tone of global politics. In this context, the European Communities occupied a somewhat ambiguous position. On the one hand, they gradually became an economic powerhouse, with a growing internal market and a strong presence in world trade. On the other hand, they remained politically weak and depended heavily on the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization for their security. This combination of economic strength and political dependence shaped the specific way in which the Communities appeared on the world stage.

In security and defence, the member states relied firmly on NATO and on bilateral ties with the United States. The trauma of the Second World War, the division of Europe, and the presence of Soviet troops in Central and Eastern Europe made military questions too sensitive to be transferred to a supranational level. Attempts to create a European Defence Community in the 1950s failed, mainly because national parliaments were not ready to give up control over their armed forces. As a result, the European Communities were deliberately designed without a defence pillar. This absence limited their formal role in high politics, especially in areas related to war, peace and strategic negotiations.

Politically, foreign policy remained the domain of national gov-

ernments. France, Germany, Italy and the others each had their own traditions, priorities and global networks. Paris had a strong voice in Africa and the Middle East; London, after it joined the Communities, brought its own global connections; Bonn sought reconciliation and stability in Europe, especially in relation to the German question and the countries of the East. These national agendas often overlapped, but they were not identical. It was therefore natural that member states tried to coordinate their foreign policies without fully merging them. This effort led to the creation of a framework known as European Political Cooperation.

European Political Cooperation emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s as a voluntary mechanism for consultation and coordination among foreign ministers. It did not form part of the legal structure of the Communities and was based on political agreements rather than binding treaties. Through regular meetings, exchanges of information and the gradual practice of issuing common statements, the member states tried to speak with a more unified voice on international crises and global issues. The idea was not to replace national foreign policies, but to avoid open contradictions and, where possible, to develop common positions.

In practice, this cooperation produced a mixed record. In some cases, such as the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe and the development of relations with Eastern Europe, the member states were able to play a constructive role and to promote a Western European perspective distinct from that of the United States, though still within a broad alliance framework. In other cases, such as the Arab–Israeli conflict or relations with Southern Africa, national sensitivities and historical legacies made it difficult to agree on more than carefully worded declarations. European Political Cooperation remained largely a diplomatic exercise among elites, with limited visibility and limited operational capacity.

The contrast between economic weight and political weakness became more visible over time. The Communities negotiated important trade agreements, contributed significantly to development aid, and shaped international economic rules. Partner countries saw them as a crucial economic actor, often more relevant than individual member states when it came to market access and

commercial conditions. At the same time, when a political or security crisis erupted, attention usually shifted back to Washington, Moscow, or national capitals in Western Europe, rather than to Brussels. The Communities were present, but not central, in many key debates about war and peace.

This imbalance also had an internal dimension. European leaders were aware that their collective economic power could support a more active and coherent political role. However, they were divided about how far to go in that direction. Some feared that a stronger European foreign policy would weaken the Atlantic alliance; others worried that it would dilute national sovereignty or expose internal divisions in times of crisis. As a result, the political ambitions of the Communities evolved cautiously, step by step, often in response to external events rather than through a single, clear strategic decision.

Nevertheless, the experience of the Cold War period was important. Through European Political Cooperation, the member states learned practical lessons about coordination, about the difficulty of formulating common positions, and about the reputational costs of inconsistency. They also observed that their economic presence in the world generated expectations: partner countries and international organisations increasingly looked to “Europe” for more than trade and aid. This pressure, combined with internal reflections on the future of integration, prepared the ground for later reforms.

In simple terms, one could say that during the Cold War the European Communities were “punching below their weight” in political terms. They had the size and influence of a major economic actor, but the voice and tools of a modest political player. This discrepancy could not last forever. With the end of the Cold War, the reunification of Germany, and the crises in the Balkans, the question of whether Europe should develop a more explicit and structured foreign and security policy became unavoidable. The limited but real experience accumulated in the period of European Political Cooperation provided both a starting point and a set of warnings for this next stage in the evolution of the European Union’s external action.

1.3. The Maastricht stage: from external relations to foreign and security policy

The end of the Cold War radically changed the environment in which the European integration project operated. For decades, the division of Europe, the presence of two nuclear superpowers, and the central role of the Atlantic alliance had limited the space for an autonomous European voice in questions of war and peace. When the Berlin Wall fell in 1989 and the socialist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe collapsed, this rigid structure began to dissolve. Suddenly, the map of Europe became fluid and uncertain. Borders were questioned, new states emerged, and long-suppressed national and ethnic tensions resurfaced. In this new context, the existing model of European external relations, focused mainly on trade and development cooperation, no longer seemed sufficient.

German unification symbolised both the success and the challenge of this new era. The integration project had been built to make conflict between France and Germany unthinkable, and in that sense it had succeeded. But the re-emergence of a larger and more powerful Germany also raised delicate questions: how would this affect the balance inside the European Communities? Would Germany's foreign policy remain firmly embedded in the European framework, or would it develop a more independent course in the East? Deepening the political dimension of integration, including in foreign and security matters, was seen by many leaders as a way to ensure that a united Germany remained fully anchored in a shared European structure.

At the same time, the violent disintegration of Yugoslavia exposed the limits of the existing cooperative mechanisms. The wars in the Balkans brought ethnic cleansing, sieges of cities, and massive flows of refugees to the very doorstep of the Communities. European governments initially tried to respond through diplomatic initiatives and peace conferences, often announcing that "the hour of Europe" had come. In practice, however, they struggled to speak with one voice, to coordinate their actions, and to mobilise credible instruments on the ground. The eventual need for strong involvement by the United States and NATO to halt the violence was a painful reminder that the European Communities were still far from being a coherent political and security actor.

These events created a strong sense that something more than incremental coordination was needed. It was in this climate that the Treaty on European Union, signed in Maastricht in 1992, was negotiated and adopted. The Maastricht Treaty transformed the European Communities into the European Union and introduced a new overall architecture. Alongside the existing economic and social policies, it created a distinct framework for a Common Foreign and Security Policy. This framework did not turn the Union into a classical state with a traditional foreign ministry and army. However, it did provide a political and legal skeleton for collective action in external affairs that went beyond trade and development.

The Common Foreign and Security Policy was conceived as a way to bring together the political will of the member states in matters that affected their shared external interests. It established common objectives, such as safeguarding the values and independence of the Union, strengthening the security of the Union and its member states, preserving peace, and promoting international cooperation. It recognised that the Union should be able to act in areas that had previously been left to national foreign policies, including crisis management, conflict prevention and, at least in principle, aspects of security policy. The precise instruments and decision-making procedures remained cautious and intergovernmental, but the symbolic step was significant: for the first time, the Union explicitly recognised foreign and security policy as a common endeavour.

The key difference from the earlier period can be captured in the shift from “external relations” to “foreign and security policy.” External relations had mainly involved the use of economic tools: trade agreements, association treaties, development aid and technical cooperation. These instruments were powerful, but they were essentially civilian and sectoral. The Maastricht stage broadened the agenda to include high-level political questions: how to respond to regional conflicts, how to position the Union in relation to major powers, how to deal with proliferation of weapons, terrorism, or large-scale human rights violations. It also brought security into the picture, not only in the military sense, but in a wider sense that linked stability in the neighbourhood to the internal safety and prosperity of the Union.

This did not mean that the Union suddenly acquired all the attributes of a traditional foreign policy actor. Member states retained control over their armed forces and their fundamental strategic choices. The Atlantic alliance remained central to the defence of Europe. But the mere existence of a Common Foreign and Security Policy changed expectations, both inside and outside the Union. Internally, it encouraged governments and institutions to think in terms of common strategies and collective responsibilities. Externally, it signalled to partners and competitors that “Europe” was no longer just a large market, but a political actor that aspired to coherence in its international behaviour.

In simple terms, the Maastricht Treaty marked the moment when the European project openly admitted that it could not remain a purely economic community in a world of political and security crises. The combination of German unification, the transformation of Central and Eastern Europe, and the tragedies in the Balkans forced the Union to take a step towards a more integrated foreign and security role. The Common Foreign and Security Policy did not resolve all the tensions between national sovereignty and collective action, but it created a common language, common objectives and a basic framework that would guide the further evolution of the Union’s external action in the decades that followed.

1.4. The development of security and defense policy within the evolution of EU external action.

The creation of a Common Foreign and Security Policy in the early 1990s was an important symbolic step, but in practical terms, the European Union remained, above all, a civilian and economic power. Its main tools were still trade policy, financial assistance, and political dialogue. The wars in the Balkans had shown that these instruments, while valuable, were not always enough to prevent or stop violent conflict. The Union could condemn atrocities, support humanitarian efforts and participate in diplomatic negotiations, but it could not, on its own, deploy credible military or robust civilian missions to manage crises. This gap between ambition and capacity became increasingly difficult to ignore.

The turning point came gradually, through a series of debates and decisions in the late 1990s. Key member states began to argue that if the Union wanted to be taken seriously as an international actor, it had to be able to act not only with declarations and economic measures, but also with security and defence instruments. This did not mean that the Union wished to become a traditional military power or to compete with the Atlantic alliance. Rather, it was about ensuring that Europe could, when necessary, take responsibility for stabilising its neighbourhood, supporting peace agreements, and protecting civilians, especially in situations where the United States preferred to remain in the background.

This reflection led to the progressive development of what was initially called a European security and defence policy. The idea was to add a new layer to the Union's external action: alongside trade, aid, and diplomacy, the Union would be able to carry out crisis management missions with both civilian and, in some cases, military components. These missions were conceived not as large-scale war operations, but as targeted interventions to ensure peace implementation, police reform, border management, training of security forces, or protection of maritime routes. In other words, the Union sought to remain a predominantly civilian power, but one with the capacity to act in the security field when circumstances demanded it.

The trajectory from hesitation to gradual engagement is particularly visible when we compare the crises of the early and late 1990s with developments in the 2000s. In the first phase, during the conflicts in former Yugoslavia, European governments often appeared divided and slow. They struggled to agree on sanctions, on recognition of new states, and on the use of military force. By contrast, in the 2000s the Union began to launch its own missions, initially in the Balkans and then in other regions. It deployed police forces, rule-of-law experts, military trainers and, in certain cases, troops to support international mandates. These operations were usually modest in size, but they signalled a clear change of attitude: the Union was no longer content to comment from the sidelines; it was willing to put "boots and brains" on the ground.

Over time, this practice expanded. The Union sent civilian mis-

sions to help reform police and justice systems in post-conflict societies, advised on border security in sensitive regions, and contributed to maritime security and anti-piracy efforts. In parallel, it undertook military operations at the request of partner countries or international organisations, for example to support peacekeeping or to protect vulnerable populations. Each mission faced its own challenges and limitations, but together they formed a new repertoire of action. Security and defence were no longer abstract words in treaty articles; they became concrete tasks carried out by European personnel under a European flag.

As the Union moved in this direction, the way it was perceived by partners and competitors also began to change. For the United States, the development of European security and defence capabilities was both welcome and sensitive. On the one hand, Washington often called for greater European “burden sharing” in crisis management and regional stability. On the other hand, it wanted to ensure that new European structures would complement, rather than duplicate or weaken, existing arrangements within the broader alliance. This dual attitude produced a complex mixture of encouragement and vigilance, but it also encouraged the Union to define more clearly how its security role related to the transatlantic framework.

Russia and other major powers also adjusted their view of the Union. Previously, they could treat the European Communities largely as a powerful economic bloc whose political influence was indirect and mostly civilian. The appearance of European security missions, especially in regions considered strategically important, made it necessary to engage with the Union as a more complex actor, one that could combine market access, financial support, diplomatic pressure and security instruments. Some partners welcomed this combination, seeing in it a comprehensive approach to stability and development. Others regarded it with caution, especially when European operations touched on sensitive issues such as borders, conflicts, or energy routes.

Internally, this evolution had a psychological effect on the Union itself. Carrying out security and defence tasks, even on a small scale, contributed to a sense that the Union was becoming

more responsible for its neighbourhood and more mature as an international actor. At the same time, these experiences revealed the practical difficulties of acting together: divergent national traditions, different legal frameworks, and unequal capabilities often complicated planning and execution. Each mission became a learning exercise, highlighting both what the Union could do and what it still lacked.

In simple terms, the development of the Union's security and defence policy can be understood as a move from a purely civilian external power to a more rounded, but still distinctive, international actor. The Union did not abandon its preference for non-military instruments, nor its belief in law, cooperation and long-term engagement. But it accepted that, in a world of fragile states, regional conflicts and hybrid threats, a credible external policy also requires the ability to act in the security field. This acceptance did not erase all doubts and controversies, but it marked an important step in the broader story of how the European Union has tried to reconcile its civilian origins with the increasingly demanding realities of international politics.

1.5. The Lisbon Treaty and the move towards a “global” European Union

The Lisbon Treaty, which entered into force at the end of 2009, marked another important turning point in the evolution of the Union's external action. While the earlier treaties had already introduced a common foreign and security policy and had started to build a security and defence dimension, the institutional structure remained fragmented. Different parts of the Union's external activity were governed by different rules, and the outside world often struggled to understand who, exactly, represented “Europe”. The Lisbon reforms did not magically solve all of these problems, but they did strengthen the overall coherence of the Union's presence on the international stage.

One of the key changes brought by the Lisbon Treaty was the recognition of the European Union as a single legal entity in external affairs. Before Lisbon, legal personality belonged formally to

the European Community, which covered mostly economic matters, while the areas of foreign and security policy had a different, more intergovernmental status. After Lisbon, there was one Union that could sign international agreements, join international organisations and be recognised as a subject of international law. This may sound technical, but it had a clear political meaning: it allowed the Union to present itself more convincingly as a unified actor, rather than a patchwork of overlapping frameworks.

This institutional consolidation went hand in hand with a broader conceptual shift. For many years, the Union had been seen mainly as a regional economic power: a successful project of market integration in Western Europe with a growing influence on neighbouring regions. Over time, however, the range of issues that required an external dimension kept expanding. Human rights, climate change, digital governance, energy security, migration, global health, and financial stability all became areas in which internal and external policies could not be separated. Decisions taken inside the Union affected the rest of the world, and developments outside the Union had direct consequences for its internal stability and prosperity.

The Lisbon Treaty tried to reflect this reality by giving external action a more integrated place within the Union's overall structure. It confirmed that the Union's foreign policy is not only about classical diplomacy or security, but also about projecting its values and priorities across a wide range of policy fields. Promoting human rights, supporting the rule of law, and contributing to sustainable development were framed as guiding principles for all strands of external engagement. Climate diplomacy, for example, became a central part of the Union's identity, with the Union acting as a leading negotiator in global climate agreements and using its regulatory power to influence global standards on emissions and energy use. In the digital field, debates about data protection, online platforms and artificial intelligence acquired a clear external dimension, as European rules shaped international expectations and business practices.

Energy and migration illustrate particularly well how the Union's external and internal agendas became intertwined. Energy

security is not only a matter of domestic market regulation; it also depends on the nature of relations with supplier countries, transit routes and regional partners. Decisions about pipelines, liquefied natural gas terminals or renewable energy cooperation have both internal economic implications and external geopolitical consequences. Similarly, migration management cannot be reduced to border control inside the Union. It involves partnerships with countries of origin and transit, development policies, visa regimes, and cooperation on readmission and asylum. In both domains, the Union has increasingly used external agreements and funding instruments to support internal objectives, while at the same time trying to uphold humanitarian and legal commitments.

The Lisbon stage also reinforced the link between foreign policy and the Union's major internal projects, such as enlargement, neighbourhood policy, the energy union and the digital single market. Enlargement policy, for instance, is not only a matter of integrating new member states; it is one of the Union's most powerful tools for transforming its wider region. By offering the perspective of membership, the Union can encourage deep political, economic and legal reforms in candidate countries. This is external policy in a very concrete sense, but it is also intimately connected to the Union's own identity and future shape. The same is true for neighbourhood policy, which aims to create a ring of stable, cooperative partners around the Union, and for sectoral projects like the energy union or the digital market, which inevitably spill over into external negotiations and regulatory dialogues.

Taken together, these developments pushed the Union closer to the position of a "global player". This does not mean that the Union became a global power in the traditional, military sense, or that it started to act in a uniform and strategically perfect way. Rather, it means that the Union's policies and regulations, its economic weight, its development programmes and its diplomatic efforts increasingly have global reach and implications. The Lisbon Treaty provided a more solid institutional foundation for this reality by clarifying the Union's legal personality and by offering a more coherent framework for its external action. But the deeper change lies in the way the Union understands itself: no longer just as a

regional market with some external relations, but as a multifaceted actor whose internal choices and external commitments are inseparable in an interdependent world.

In simpler language, one could say that Lisbon helped the Union grow into its own shadow. For many years, it behaved like a regional organisation, even though its size and influence were already global. By recognising its single legal identity, by bringing different strands of external action closer together, and by explicitly linking foreign policy to its major internal projects, the Union took another step in aligning its structures with the realities of global interdependence. This step did not end debates about coherence or power, but it made it clearer that Europe's future as an international actor depends on how well it can connect what it does at home with what it aspires to do in the wider world.

1.6. The contemporary stage: from “normative power” to the search for strategic autonomy

In the most recent phase of its development, the European Union has been rethinking how it understands its own role in the world. For a long time, academic and political debates described the Union as a “civilian” or “normative” power. These labels highlighted its preference for economic instruments, law-based cooperation and the promotion of values such as human rights, democracy and multilateralism. The Union was seen as an actor that tried to shape the international environment by exporting rules, standards and practices rather than by using military force. This image captured important aspects of reality, but it also tended to understate the harder strategic questions that emerged as the global order began to fragment.

Gradually, the Union's own leaders started to use a different language. The notion of a “geopolitical” Union or a “geopolitical” Commission expressed the idea that Europe could no longer rely mainly on regulation, trade and soft power to protect its interests and values. It needed to be more conscious of power politics, more attentive to the behaviour of major states, and more willing to use a full range of tools, including restrictive measures and security

instruments. At the same time, the concept of “strategic autonomy” gained prominence. In simple terms, this concept refers to the capacity of the Union to act in key areas without being excessively dependent on others. It does not imply isolation or the abandonment of alliances, but it does suggest that the Union should be able to make and implement decisions that are not entirely constrained by external actors.

This shift in self-perception did not occur in a vacuum. It was largely driven by a succession of crises that exposed the vulnerabilities and limits of the existing model. The global financial crisis and the subsequent sovereign debt crisis in Europe showed how quickly economic shocks could undermine social cohesion and political stability. The migration crisis highlighted the extent to which conflicts and governance failures in neighbouring regions could create domestic tensions and test solidarity among member states. The pandemic demonstrated the risks of fragile supply chains and the consequences of insufficient preparedness in health systems. Above all, the renewed aggression against Ukraine, first in 2014 and then on a much larger scale from 2022 onwards, brought war back to the European continent in a way that shattered long-held assumptions about the stability of the post-Cold War order.

Each of these crises pushed the Union to move faster and to expand its toolkit. In response to the financial crisis, it developed new mechanisms for financial stability and deeper forms of economic coordination, which had clear external implications in fields such as banking and capital markets. The migration crisis led to new arrangements with countries of origin and transit, a more visible role for border and coast guard structures, and intense debates about responsibility and solidarity inside the Union. The pandemic triggered an unprecedented joint effort to purchase vaccines, support economic recovery through collective borrowing, and reconsider Europe’s dependence on external suppliers for medical goods and critical technologies. The war in Ukraine brought rapid and far-reaching decisions on sanctions, energy diversification, military assistance and the broader security posture of the Union and its member states.

These experiences have made certain challenges impossible to

ignore. One of them is the fragmentation of the global order. The relatively stable, rules-based multilateral system that the Union had supported and benefited from is under pressure from growing rivalry between major powers, selective respect for international law, and the use of economic instruments as tools of political coercion. In such an environment, the Union cannot simply assume that its preferences will be reflected in global governance. It has to actively defend them, adapt to a more competitive setting, and sometimes operate in a world where no single framework offers predictable solutions.

Another challenge is the intensification of competition among major powers, especially between the United States and China. This rivalry affects trade, technology, security alliances and regional balances. For the Union, it raises difficult questions about alignment, diversification and the protection of its own interests. On the one hand, the Union shares values and strategic ties with the United States and remains closely connected through security arrangements and economic links. On the other hand, it has deep economic relationships with China and other partners, and it must consider how to avoid being pulled into confrontations that do not fully correspond to its own priorities. The language of strategic autonomy reflects precisely this tension: the desire to remain loyal to core partnerships while retaining the freedom to choose.

Sanctions policy has become a central instrument in this context. The Union has increasingly resorted to restrictive measures in response to violations of international law, human rights abuses, and threats to peace and security. Sanctions target individuals, entities, sectors and sometimes entire segments of an economy. They signal moral and political positions, but they also have practical consequences, including for European companies and citizens. Managing these consequences, ensuring consistency with legal principles, and coordinating with partners such as the United States and like-minded states have become complex tasks that require both strategic vision and technical expertise.

Finally, the issues of energy and technological dependence illustrate why strategic autonomy is not an abstract idea but a very concrete concern. Heavy reliance on a limited number of external

suppliers for energy, especially when those suppliers are willing to use energy as a political tool, exposes the Union to risks that can undermine both foreign policy and domestic stability. Similarly, dependence on foreign technologies, digital infrastructures and critical raw materials makes the Union vulnerable to supply disruptions, political pressure or technological lock-in. Efforts to diversify energy sources, accelerate the green transition, strengthen internal energy networks, invest in digital infrastructure and support strategic industries are all part of a broader attempt to reduce these vulnerabilities.

In this contemporary stage, the Union is therefore trying to reconcile several identities at once. It still sees itself as a promoter of norms, multilateralism and cooperative solutions. It continues to rely on its economic and regulatory power to shape the environment beyond its borders. At the same time, it is learning to think and act in more strategic terms, acknowledging that power, resilience and autonomy matter in a world marked by uncertainty and rivalry. This learning process is uneven and often contested, both among member states and within Union institutions. Yet it represents a natural continuation of the evolution traced in previous stages: from a primarily economic community with limited external ambitions to a more complex political actor that must constantly balance values, interests and capabilities on a changing global stage.

Questions:

1. How did economic integration and common trade policy shape the early external relations of the European Communities in the 1950s and 1960s?
2. In what ways did association agreements with former colonies and Mediterranean countries influence the Communities' identity as an international actor in the early phase?
3. Why were the European Communities politically limited during the Cold War despite their growing economic weight in world trade?
4. What was European Political Cooperation (EPC), and how did it differ from a fully-fledged common foreign policy?

5. How did the end of the Cold War, German reunification and the wars in the Balkans create pressure for a more coherent European foreign and security policy?
6. What was the qualitative change introduced by the Maastricht Treaty when it transformed “external relations” into a Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP)?
7. In what sense did CFSP mark a shift from mainly economic tools to a broader agenda that included political and security issues?
8. Why did the EU feel compelled to develop a security and defence policy after the crises of the 1990s, and how did crisis management missions change its external profile?
9. How do civilian and military missions under the EU’s security and defence policy complement its traditional diplomatic and economic instruments?
10. What was the significance of the Lisbon Treaty in terms of giving the EU a more coherent legal and institutional basis for its external action?
11. How did the Lisbon Treaty contribute to the EU’s evolution from a mainly regional economic actor to a more “global” player with a multi-level agenda (human rights, climate, digital, energy, migration)?
12. In what ways are the EU’s internal projects (enlargement, neighbourhood policy, energy union, digital single market) now closely intertwined with its external relations?
13. What is meant by describing the EU as a “normative” or “civilian” power, and why has this description become insufficient in today’s international environment?
14. How have successive crises (financial crisis, migration crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, war in Ukraine) accelerated the EU’s move from soft, normative influence towards a search for strategic autonomy?
15. What are the main dilemmas the EU faces today when trying to balance its commitment to values and multilateralism with the need to protect its own security, energy and technological interests?

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TOPIC 2: SHAPING THE EU'S FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY: ACTORS, INSTITUTIONS AND TOOLS

- 2.1. *The place of foreign and security policy in the EU system*
- 2.2. *Key actors and the institutional architecture*
- 2.3. *Decision-making processes in foreign and security policy*
- 2.4. *The main instruments of the EU's Foreign and Security policy*
- 2.5. *Contemporary challenges and directions of development*

The overall goal of Topic 2 is to help students understand how the European Union's foreign and security policy works in practice: who the main actors are, how institutions interact, how decisions are taken, which tools are used, and what problems and dilemmas this system faces today.

Expected learning results

After studying Topic 2, students should be able to:

- Explain the special place of foreign and security policy within the broader EU system;
- Describe the roles of the main institutional actors (European Council, Council, Commission, Parliament, High Representative, European External Action Service, member states);
- Outline how decisions are taken in foreign and security policy, including the role of unanimity, qualified majority and constructive abstention;
- Identify the main instruments used by the EU in its external action (diplomatic, economic, legal, security);
- and reflect critically on contemporary challenges such as internal divisions, slow reactions and the tension between normative ambitions and strategic autonomy.

Key terms:

Foreign and security policy – the set of common positions and actions through which the EU and its member states respond to external political and security challenges;

European Council – the body that brings together heads of state or government and provides overall strategic direction for the EU's external action;

Council of the European Union – the institution where ministers of the member states adopt concrete foreign policy decisions, such as common positions, sanctions or the launch of missions;

European Commission – the institution that manages many external policies with a strong internal dimension, including trade, development cooperation and the external aspects of sectoral policies;

European Parliament – the directly elected body that contributes democratic oversight, influences external budgets and must give consent to many international agreements;

High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy – the EU's chief diplomat, who chairs the Foreign Affairs Council and links intergovernmental foreign policy with the Commission's external competences;

European External Action Service – the EU's diplomatic service, which supports the High Representative and runs the network of EU delegations in third countries and at international organisations;

Foreign policy instruments – the tools the EU uses externally, including diplomatic dialogue, political declarations, international agreements, economic measures, sanctions and civilian or military missions.

2.1. The place of foreign and security policy in the EU system

Within the overall system of the European Union, foreign and security policy occupies a somewhat special and, in many respects, unusual position. Most Union policies – such as the internal market, competition, agriculture, environment or consumer protection – follow a familiar supranational logic. Member states have transferred a significant part of their powers to the European level; decisions are often taken by majority voting; the European Parliament has a clear role; and the Court of Justice acts as the final interpreter

of the rules. Foreign and security policy does not fully follow this pattern. It is integrated into the Union's framework, but it remains closer to traditional state sovereignty and intergovernmental cooperation than many internal policies.

One way to understand this is to look at what foreign and security policy touches. Questions of war and peace, the use of military force, alliances, recognition of states, and high-level diplomatic positions go to the heart of what states have historically guarded as their core prerogatives. For many governments and societies, these areas are closely tied to national identity, constitutional traditions and democratic control by national parliaments. When the Union developed its common foreign and security policy, member states were therefore cautious. They agreed to cooperate and to seek common positions, but they did not want to fully transfer these powers to supranational institutions in the same way as they had done in the economic field.

As a result, foreign and security policy has a hybrid status. On the one hand, it is clearly part of the Union's legal and political order. There are common objectives, agreed principles and joint actions. The Union speaks in the name of all member states in many international fora, negotiates on their behalf in certain areas, and adopts collective decisions that are binding in practice, for example in the field of sanctions. On the other hand, many key choices – especially those related to security and defence – still require unanimity among governments. The European Parliament has a more limited role than in internal policies, and the Court of Justice has only a restricted jurisdiction. This creates an area of policy that is “inside” the Union, but not fully governed by the same supranational rules.

The division of responsibilities between the Union and its member states in the external sphere also reflects this balance. In some domains, the Union has very strong and even exclusive powers. Trade policy is the clearest example: when it comes to tariffs, trade agreements or common commercial rules, the Union acts as a single entity and member states may not conclude separate agreements that contradict its common policy. Over time, elements of external economic relations – such as investment, certain aspects

of services, or the external dimension of competition and regulation – have also moved closer to the Union level. In these areas, the Union is the primary actor, and national foreign policies must adapt to the collectively agreed line.

In contrast, in core political and security matters, member states retain more autonomy. They maintain their own embassies, intelligence services, armed forces and bilateral agreements. They can take positions on international crises, join coalitions, or engage in regional initiatives, as long as they do not openly contradict common European commitments. The common foreign and security policy encourages them to coordinate, to inform each other and to seek unity where possible, but it does not abolish their national foreign policies. In practice, this means that European external action is often the result of negotiation and compromise between national views and Union-level perspectives.

This division is not static. Over the years, practice and crises have pushed member states to accept a stronger Union role in certain external areas, simply because acting together has proven more effective or more credible. At the same time, tensions occasionally arise when national governments feel that their specific historical ties, geographical interests or domestic political constraints are not fully reflected in common positions. Foreign and security policy is therefore a field where the Union's identity as both a community of states and a political union is constantly negotiated.

In everyday language, we can say that foreign and security policy sits at the frontier between "Europe" and the member states. It is European enough to give the Union a collective presence on the world stage, but national enough to remind us that the Union is not a state and that its external voice must be built through persuasion and agreement rather than imposed from above. This special status makes the area complex and sometimes frustrating, but it also explains why decisions in this field often carry such a strong symbolic and political weight.

2.2. Key actors and the institutional architecture

The system of foreign and security policy in the European Union is built around several key actors that together form a dense institutional network. At the core of this network stand the European Council and the Council of the European Union. Around them, the European Commission and the European Parliament play important roles, especially in external economic relations and in providing political and democratic oversight. The High Representative and the European External Action Service give this complex system a more unified voice and professional diplomatic support. Finally, the member states and their national diplomacies remain indispensable, both as decision-makers and as implementers of external policy on the ground.

The European Council is often described as the strategic centre of gravity in the Union's external action. It brings together the heads of state or government of the member states, together with the President of the European Council and the President of the Commission. When major international questions arise – such as relations with large powers, responses to wars and crises, or choices about enlargement and neighbourhood – it is usually the European Council that sets the overall direction. Its conclusions, adopted by consensus, do not go into technical detail, but they define the main lines of policy: who the Union considers a strategic partner, how it positions itself in a conflict, which values and interests it wants to emphasise. In moments of crisis, extraordinary meetings of the European Council often become the place where member states negotiate a common response and signal unity to the outside world.

The Council of the European Union, in its different configurations, translates these strategic orientations into more concrete decisions. In foreign and security policy, the key format is the Foreign Affairs Council, composed of the foreign ministers of the member states and chaired by the High Representative. When defence issues are at stake, the ministers of defence may meet in a similar configuration. The Council adopts common positions, approves the launch of missions, agrees on sanctions and endorses negotiation mandates for international agreements. In external economic rela-

tions, other formations of the Council, such as those dealing with trade, development or economic affairs, also play an important role. The Council is therefore the main arena where national governments, acting collectively, turn political will into binding acts.

The European Commission occupies a central place wherever external and internal policies intersect. It is responsible for trade policy, for many aspects of development cooperation and humanitarian aid, and for the external dimension of internal policies such as energy, climate, migration or digital regulation. In these areas, the Commission negotiates international agreements, manages financial instruments, and proposes legislative and policy initiatives. Its services maintain regular dialogues with partner countries and international organisations, ensuring continuity and technical expertise. The President of the Commission and some of its members also participate actively in high-level diplomacy, representing the Union at summits and international conferences, especially where economic, regulatory or global governance issues dominate the agenda.

The European Parliament, although it does not control foreign and security policy in the same way as it controls internal legislation, plays a growing role in the Union's external action. It gives or withholds consent to many international agreements, especially those involving trade, association or cooperation. It debates foreign policy issues, adopts resolutions, and invites external leaders to address its sessions. Through its budgetary powers, it influences the design and funding of external instruments. Members of the European Parliament travel, observe elections, engage with civil society and partner parliaments. The Parliament thus contributes a democratic and often strongly value-based perspective to the Union's external activities, emphasising human rights, rule of law and transparency.

At the intersection of these institutions stands the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. This figure is sometimes described as the Union's chief diplomat. The High Representative has a double role: at the same time vice-president of the Commission and chair of the Foreign Affairs Council. This dual position is meant to bridge the gap between intergovernmental

foreign policy and the more supranational external competences of the Union. In practice, the High Representative is expected to build consensus among member states, coordinate the work of the Commission in external fields, and represent the Union on the international stage. The personal style, experience and networks of each High Representative can make a real difference, since much of the job involves persuasion, mediation and the patient construction of common positions.

Supporting the High Representative is the European External Action Service, which functions as the Union's diplomatic service. It brings together officials from the Union institutions and diplomats seconded by the member states. At its headquarters, the service is organised into geographic and thematic directorates that follow regions and issues across the world. Abroad, the Union is represented by delegations in third countries and at international organisations. These delegations act in many ways like embassies: they maintain political contacts, report on local developments, coordinate the external actions of the Union on the ground, and often provide a platform for member states' embassies to cooperate. The External Action Service thus gives the Union a professional presence in international diplomacy and helps to ensure that its actions are coherent across different policy fields.

Despite this dense institutional architecture, the member states and their national diplomacies remain central actors. They retain their own foreign ministries, embassies, consulates and special envoys. They have historical ties, regional priorities and domestic constraints that shape their foreign policy preferences. In the common foreign and security policy, decisions typically require consensus, which gives each state a voice and, in sensitive matters, a form of veto power. National diplomats are deeply involved in the preparatory committees and working groups that feed into Council decisions. In many cases, groups of member states take the lead on specific issues or regions, acting as "driving forces" within the Union framework. On the ground, national embassies and Union delegations often work side by side, sharing information, coordinating messages and, where appropriate, speaking jointly.

In everyday terms, one can think of the Union's external policy

machinery as a crowded stage rather than a single actor. Heads of state and government set the broad script, ministers in the Council translate it into operational decisions, the Commission manages key policy instruments, the Parliament voices democratic concerns, the High Representative and the External Action Service provide coordination and diplomatic presence, and national diplomacies bring their experience and resources. This complexity can be a source of friction and delay, but it also reflects the Union's nature as a union of states and peoples rather than a centralised state. When it works well, this architecture allows the Union to combine different strengths: the political legitimacy of national governments and parliaments, the technical capacity of the Commission, the normative voice of the Parliament, and the professional diplomacy of the External Action Service.

2.3. Decision-making processes in foreign and security policy

Decision-making in the Union's foreign and security policy reflects the same tension that shapes its institutional architecture: a desire for common action combined with a strong attachment to national sovereignty. This tension is most visible in the basic rule that governs how decisions are taken. In most areas of foreign and security policy, the default requirement is unanimity among the governments of the member states. This means that all states must agree before the Union can adopt a common position on a sensitive issue, launch a mission, or impose sanctions. Unanimity reassures governments that they will not be forced into foreign or security commitments against their will. At the same time, it makes decision-making vulnerable to blockages, last-minute bargaining and the influence of domestic politics in any single member state.

There are, however, some carefully defined openings for decisions by qualified majority. In certain cases, once the European Council has agreed on broad strategic guidelines, more detailed implementing measures can be adopted without unanimity. This is particularly relevant where foreign policy overlaps with areas of stronger Union competence, such as restrictive measures that

must be translated into binding legal acts affecting companies and individuals. Even here, the use of majority voting is politically sensitive and subject to many safeguards. As a result, the possibility of qualified majority acts more as a potential tool to speed up implementation and to discourage obstruction than as a routine method of deciding on high-profile foreign policy choices.

Alongside unanimity and majority voting, the notion of “constructive abstention” offers another way to manage differences among member states. Under this practice, a government that cannot fully support a decision, but does not wish to block the others, may formally abstain in a way that allows the Union to move forward. The abstaining state declares that it will not be bound by certain aspects of the decision, particularly in the field of security and defence, but at the same time accepts that the decision will be adopted and implemented by the others. This mechanism recognises that complete consensus is sometimes unrealistic, yet it tries to preserve unity where it matters most: in the collective image of the Union and in the willingness of a critical mass of states to act together.

These procedures are not just technical devices. They raise important questions about political and democratic responsibility. Who is accountable when the Union adopts a foreign policy stance, participates in a mission, or decides on far-reaching sanctions? On one level, responsibility lies with national governments, since they are the ones who sit in the European Council and the Council of the European Union, and who must explain their positions to their own parliaments and voters. National parliaments retain the power to question ministers, to debate sensitive decisions and, in some countries, to authorise the deployment of troops or other forms of participation in international operations. This national layer of control keeps foreign and security policy close to domestic democratic processes.

At the same time, there is also responsibility at the level of the Union as a whole. The High Representative and the Commission must report to the European Parliament, present strategies, answer questions and justify the use of external instruments. The Parliament cannot initiate foreign policy decisions in the same way as

it can initiate or amend internal legislation, but it can shape the debate, draw public attention to neglected issues and influence the design of external budgets and programmes. Civil society, media and academic observers also contribute to a broader conversation about the direction, coherence and ethical implications of the Union's external actions. Even the limited role of the Court of Justice in foreign and security matters is part of this picture, as it ensures that certain procedural and fundamental rights standards are respected when decisions affect individuals and companies.

In everyday terms, one might say that decision-making in this field is deliberately "slow and noisy". It is slow because unanimity and careful coordination take time, especially when decisions have serious consequences. It is noisy because different institutional voices, national parliaments and public debates constantly react to, reinterpret and sometimes contest the choices made. This can be frustrating in moments of crisis, when fast and decisive action is needed. Yet it also reflects the Union's character as a political system that tries to combine effectiveness with legitimacy, and shared external goals with respect for the diversity of its member states.

2.4. The main instruments of the EU's Foreign and Security policy

The Union's foreign and security policy rests on a broad toolbox of instruments that range from very soft forms of influence to measures with strong legal and material effects. At one end of the spectrum are diplomatic and political tools. These include regular political dialogues with third countries, participation in international organisations and conferences, and the practice of issuing common positions and declarations. Through high-level summits, ministerial meetings and working-level contacts, the Union engages in continuous conversation with partners, competitors and regional organisations. Declarations and statements may seem modest at first sight, but they matter: they signal how the Union interprets events, what behaviour it rewards or criticises, and which principles it is prepared to defend. When twenty-seven states speak together, even a carefully worded sentence can send

a powerful message, especially if it is backed by the possibility of further measures.

Diplomatic tools are not limited to official speeches. They also include mediation efforts, support for peace processes, election observation and quiet diplomacy behind the scenes. The Union often relies on its delegations and on special representatives to build trust, listen to local actors and propose compromise formulas. In conflict-affected societies, the Union's presence can take the form of supporting dialogue platforms, constitutional reforms or reconciliation initiatives. In all these cases, the underlying idea is that long-term stability grows from inclusive, rule-based politics, and that the external role of the Union is to assist, encourage and sometimes gently pressure towards such outcomes. These political instruments are often the first line of engagement and remain active even when more forceful tools are deployed.

Alongside diplomacy, the Union uses contractual and economic instruments, which are particularly important given its nature as a market and regulatory power. International agreements form the legal backbone of many external relationships. Association agreements, partnership and cooperation agreements, trade agreements and sectoral accords in areas such as transport, energy or research create structured frameworks for cooperation. They set out mutual rights and obligations, establish joint institutions, and often include conditionality clauses related to democracy, human rights or specific reforms. By offering access to its market, financial support and regulatory cooperation, the Union can encourage partner countries to align with its standards and policies. This is sometimes described as "integration through law": the more a partner country's laws and practices converge with those of the Union, the easier economic and political cooperation becomes.

Trade policy is a particularly visible part of this contractual toolbox. The Union negotiates tariffs, quotas and rules on services and investment not only to open markets for its businesses, but also to promote broad regulatory principles such as transparency, non-discrimination and environmental or labour protections. Because of the size of the internal market, European standards often become global reference points, shaping how products are

designed and how data is handled far beyond the Union's borders. Development cooperation and financial assistance complement this picture. Through bilateral programmes and thematic instruments, the Union supports governance reforms, infrastructure projects, education and health initiatives, and responses to humanitarian crises. These funds are not purely altruistic; they are also intended to reduce instability, address root causes of conflict or irregular migration, and build partnerships that serve shared interests. Still, they are typically framed in a language of solidarity and partnership, which remains central to the Union's self-image.

Sanctions and restrictive measures occupy a more coercive part of the toolkit. When diplomatic efforts fail or when serious violations of international law occur, the Union may decide to impose targeted measures against individuals, entities, sectors or even parts of an economy. These can include asset freezes, travel bans, embargoes on certain goods, or restrictions on financial transactions and technology transfers. Sanctions are usually adopted in response to clear triggers: aggression against another state, serious human rights abuses, terrorism, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, or grave corruption. They serve several purposes at once: signalling disapproval, increasing the cost of unacceptable behaviour, and encouraging a change of course without resorting to the use of force. Because sanctions have real consequences for businesses and individuals within the Union, they must be carefully designed and legally robust, and they often require close coordination with partners such as the United States, the United Kingdom and other like-minded countries.

Finally, the Union's foreign and security policy includes civilian and military missions and operations under the Common Security and Defence Policy. These missions are typically deployed to support crisis management, conflict prevention or post-conflict stabilisation. Civilian missions may work with local authorities to reform police and justice systems, strengthen border management, advise on security sector governance, or monitor ceasefires. Military operations can range from providing support to international peacekeeping efforts to protecting sea lanes or helping to implement peace agreements. These engagements are usually authorised

at the request of partner governments or endorsed by international organisations such as the United Nations. They are not large-scale war-fighting missions, but rather focused interventions designed to create space for political solutions and to protect civilians in vulnerable situations.

What makes these missions distinctive is their integration into a broader approach. They rarely stand alone; instead, they are combined with diplomatic initiatives, economic support and development programmes. A civilian mission that trains police forces, for example, may operate alongside projects that reform the judiciary, strengthen civil society and improve local economic prospects. A maritime operation that combats piracy or illegal trafficking may be linked to efforts to build coastal state capacity, improve regional cooperation and address the economic conditions that fuel insecurity. In this way, security instruments are nested within a wider concept of external action that keeps the Union's civilian character at the centre while acknowledging the need for credible presence in the security field.

Taken together, these instruments illustrate the layered nature of the Union's external policy. The Union seeks to influence its environment primarily through dialogue, law, economic ties and support for reforms, but it also keeps in reserve more coercive measures such as sanctions and, where necessary, limited security deployments. The combination is not always perfectly coordinated, and debates continue about the right balance between values and interests, or between soft and harder tools. Yet the existence of this broad toolbox is one of the Union's main assets. It allows responses that are more nuanced than pure military power, but more substantial than diplomatic speeches alone, and it reflects the Union's ambition to be a comprehensive actor in a complex international landscape.

2.5. Contemporary challenges and directions of development

The current system of actors and instruments in the Union's foreign and security policy faces two closely linked challenges. The first concerns coherence among the member states and the speed with which the Union can react to external events. The second concerns the deeper question of identity: how to preserve the Union's role as a promoter of norms and values while also becoming more strategically autonomous in a world marked by competition, pressure and uncertainty.

Coherence is difficult because foreign policy remains a deeply political and sensitive field. Member states have different histories, geographical locations and economic ties. For some, relations with the Eastern neighbourhood are at the centre of concern; for others, the Mediterranean or Africa are more prominent. Energy dependence, migration routes, defence traditions and historical memories all shape national preferences. When a crisis erupts – whether in the neighbourhood or further away – these different sensitivities may lead to diverging instincts: some governments prefer dialogue and caution, others favour strong sanctions or a more visible security presence. The common decision-making system, which relies largely on unanimity, means that these differences must be reconciled before the Union can act.

This reconciliation takes time. The need to reach consensus can slow down the Union's response exactly when speed is critical: markets move quickly, conflicts escalate, and other powers are ready to fill the vacuum. In some cases, by the time a common position is agreed, the situation on the ground has already changed. This does not mean that the Union is incapable of acting decisively; in recent years it has shown that it can agree on far-reaching packages of measures when political will is strong. But the tension between the desire for unity and the need for rapid action remains. It raises the question of whether existing procedures should be adjusted to allow more frequent use of majority voting in certain external areas, and whether member states are ready to accept the political consequences of such a change.

The second challenge goes beyond procedures and touches on how the Union understands its external role. For many years, the idea of “normative power” Europe captured the belief that the Union’s main strength lay in its ability to shape international norms, to support multilateral institutions and to promote human rights, democracy and the rule of law. This identity remains important and continues to inspire many of the Union’s external actions. At the same time, the international environment has become more demanding. Other major actors use economic dependencies, technology, energy and information as tools of influence. Military power and hard security considerations have returned more visibly to the centre of international politics. In this context, relying only on persuasion and example is no longer enough.

The notion of strategic autonomy has emerged as a way of expressing the need for greater resilience and independence without abandoning partnerships or values. It invites the Union to think more carefully about where it is vulnerable to external pressure – for instance in critical supply chains, energy sources, defence capabilities or digital infrastructures – and to reduce these vulnerabilities through diversification, investment and internal coordination. It also implies that the Union should be able to decide, in key moments, how to act based on its own assessment of the situation, rather than simply following the preferences of others, even when they are close allies. The difficulty lies in translating this concept into concrete policies while maintaining the Union’s credibility as a principled, cooperative actor.

Finding the right balance between normative commitments and strategic autonomy will shape the development of the Union’s system of actors and instruments in the coming years. On the one hand, there is a push to strengthen the efficiency of external action: better coordination among institutions, more flexible use of financial tools, deeper integration of civilian and military planning, and possibly broader use of qualified majority voting in specific areas. On the other hand, there is a strong desire to ensure that any increase in strategic capacity does not undermine the legal and ethical foundations of the Union’s external identity. Debates about arms exports, security cooperation with authoritarian regimes, or

the human rights implications of migration agreements are clear examples of this tension.

In practical terms, the future of the Union's foreign and security policy will depend on whether its member states and institutions can maintain unity under pressure, adapt procedures without losing legitimacy, and use the full toolbox of instruments in ways that are both effective and consistent with its core values. The system of actors and instruments described in this chapter is therefore not a finished structure but an evolving framework, constantly reshaped by crises, political choices and the changing landscape of international relations.

Questions:

1. How does the special status of foreign and security policy differ from the more "normal" supranational policies of the EU, such as the internal market or competition policy?
2. Why have member states been more cautious about transferring powers in foreign and security policy than in many economic or social areas?
3. In what sense is foreign and security policy a "hybrid" field that is both part of the EU system and still closely linked to national sovereignty?
4. What is the specific role of the European Council in shaping the overall strategic direction of the EU's external action?
5. How does the Council of the European Union, especially the Foreign Affairs Council, turn broad political orientations into concrete foreign policy decisions?
6. In which ways do the European Commission and the European Parliament influence the EU's external action, particularly in trade, development and international agreements?
7. Why is the High Representative often described as a "bridge" between member states and EU institutions, and how does the European External Action Service support this role?
8. How do national diplomacies and embassies of member states interact with EU delegations in third countries, and what are the advantages and difficulties of this dual presence?

9. What are the main decision-making rules in the Common Foreign and Security Policy, and why does unanimity play such a central role?
10. How do qualified majority voting and constructive abstention seek to reconcile the need for common action with the protection of sensitive national interests?
11. What forms do the EU's diplomatic and political instruments take (for example, dialogues, declarations, mediation), and how can they shape the behaviour of partners?
12. How do international agreements, trade policy and financial assistance function as external instruments that both serve EU interests and promote reforms in partner countries?
13. In which situations does the EU resort to sanctions and restrictive measures, and what are the main opportunities and risks associated with this tool?
14. What is the purpose of civilian and military missions under the EU's security and defence policy, and how do they complement other external instruments?
15. What are the key contemporary challenges for the EU's system of actors and tools in foreign and security policy, especially regarding internal coherence, speed of reaction, and the balance between normative power and strategic autonomy?

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TOPIC 3: ENLARGEMENT AS EU FOREIGN POLICY

- 3.1. *Enlargement within the system of EU external action*
- 3.2. *The historical evolution of Enlargement Policy*
- 3.3. *Principles, criteria and conditionality*
- 3.4. *Procedures and instruments of enlargement policy*
- 3.5. *Enlargement, neighbourhood and the borders of the EU*
- 3.6. *Contemporary debates and prospects of enlargement*

The overall goal of Topic 3 is to help students understand enlargement as one of the European Union's most powerful external policy instruments: how it has evolved over time, which principles and conditions it is based on, how the enlargement process works in practice, how it interacts with neighbourhood policy and questions of borders, and why current debates about future enlargements are closely linked to the EU's geopolitical role and identity.

Expected learning results

After studying Topic 3, students should be able to:

- Explain why enlargement is not just an internal process but also a key tool of the eu's foreign policy and regional transformation;
- Describe the main historical waves of enlargement and their impact on the eu and on wider europe;
- Identify and interpret the core principles and criteria of enlargement, including the copenhagen criteria and the logic of conditionality;
- Outline the main stages and instruments of the enlargement process, from association to accession negotiations and pre-accession assistance;
- Analyse the relationship between enlargement policy, the european neighbourhood policy and alternative forms of deep integration without full membership;
- And reflect critically on contemporary debates about "enlargement fatigue", rule of law challenges and the geopo-

litical importance of western balkans and eastern partners for the eu's external role.

Key terms:

Enlargement – the process through which new countries join the European Union by meeting agreed political, economic and legal conditions and signing an accession treaty;

Copenhagen criteria – the basic political, economic and institutional conditions that a state must fulfil to become an EU member, including democracy, rule of law, human rights, a functioning market economy and the capacity to implement EU law;

Conditionality – the principle that closer integration and more support from the EU depend on concrete progress in reforms, often summarised as “more for more” and including the possibility to slow down or reverse the process if reforms are not sustained;

Candidate country – a state that has been formally recognised by the EU as having a membership perspective and that is either preparing for or already engaged in accession negotiations;

Accession negotiations – the structured process in which the EU and a candidate country examine and align national laws and institutions with the EU acquis, chapter by chapter, before signing an accession treaty;

Pre-accession assistance – financial and technical support from the EU to aspiring members to help them carry out reforms, strengthen institutions and prepare for the obligations of membership;

European Neighbourhood Policy – the EU's framework for political and economic cooperation with neighbouring countries that are close, but not necessarily on a clear track to membership, based on shared values and gradual integration;

Absorption capacity – the EU's ability to integrate new members without undermining its own institutional functioning, policy effectiveness and public support, often used as a parameter in debates about the pace and scope of future enlargements.

3.1. Enlargement within the system of EU external action

Within the broader landscape of the Union's external action, enlargement has a very particular place. It is not simply one policy field among many; it is one of the most powerful instruments the Union possesses to influence its neighbourhood and to shape the political, economic and legal environment beyond its borders. While trade agreements, development programmes and diplomatic dialogues can create incentives and frameworks for cooperation, enlargement goes much further. It offers the possibility of membership in the Union itself, with all the rights and responsibilities that this entails. This promise has a transformative effect on candidate countries and, at the same time, feeds back into how the Union understands its own identity and limits.

Seen from the perspective of foreign policy, enlargement can be described as a long-term strategy for stabilising and transforming the Union's surrounding space. When the Union opens the door to new members, it does so under strict conditions: candidate countries are expected to build functioning democratic institutions, protect human rights, guarantee the rule of law, develop a market economy capable of coping with competition inside the Union, and adopt the entire body of Union law. The promise of membership therefore becomes a powerful lever for internal reforms in those countries. Governments adopt laws, reorganise public administrations, modernise their economies and sometimes revise constitutions in order to align themselves with the Union's requirements. The Union does not directly govern these societies; it creates a framework in which domestic actors – politicians, civil servants, judges, businesses and civil society – find it in their interest to move in a European direction.

This transformative potential is the reason why enlargement is often described as one of the Union's most successful external policies. In Central and Eastern Europe after the end of the Cold War, the perspective of joining the Union helped to consolidate democratic transitions, to anchor economic reforms and to reduce the temptation of nationalist or authoritarian alternatives. In the Western Balkans, the prospect of membership has been used to

encourage reconciliation after war, to promote regional cooperation and to resolve bilateral disputes. In all these cases, enlargement serves foreign policy goals: it contributes to peace, stability and prosperity in the Union's neighbourhood, and it reduces the risk that crises will spill over into Union territory.

At the same time, enlargement is deeply connected to the internal logic of integration. The Union is not a simple international organisation that can constantly add new members without much change to its own functioning. Each new enlargement requires adjustments in internal decision-making, budgetary arrangements and policy implementation. The question "who can join?" is therefore also a question about "what the Union is" and "how far it can stretch" without losing coherence. This internal dimension explains why debates about enlargement often combine security arguments, economic calculations and discussions about cultural and political identity. Extending membership is not only a gesture towards the outside world; it is a choice about how the Union wants to evolve from within.

The link between internal integration and external transformation becomes particularly visible when we look at the role of the *acquis communautaire* – the accumulated body of Union law and practice. Candidate countries are expected to adopt and implement this *acquis* before accession. This includes not only formal legislation but also standards, regulatory approaches and administrative cultures. In this way, enlargement operates as a large-scale mechanism for exporting norms. Instead of negotiating individual rules one by one, the Union essentially offers a package: acceptance of a comprehensive legal and normative framework in exchange for full participation in the benefits of membership. For candidate countries, this is demanding. It requires a profound reorganisation of domestic systems. But it also offers a clear direction of travel and a high degree of predictability.

This "export of norms" goes beyond technical regulation. It also involves values and political principles. The so-called Copenhagen criteria, which define the basic conditions for membership, emphasise democracy, human rights, minority protection and the rule of law. These are not purely internal issues; they are central to

how the Union wants to be perceived externally. When the Union insists that aspiring members reform their judiciaries, fight corruption or guarantee media freedom, it is both protecting its own legal and political space and projecting an image of what it considers legitimate and desirable governance. In this sense, enlargement combines the Union's identity as a community of values with its role as an international actor.

However, the export of norms through enlargement is not a one-way street. As candidate countries adjust to Union standards, they also bring their own experiences, perspectives and sensitivities into the Union. When they finally join, they participate in shaping future policies and in redefining the Union's stance towards other neighbours. The internal and external dimensions of enlargement thus constantly interact. Each enlargement wave shifts the centre of gravity of debates within the Union – for example, by giving more weight to Eastern neighbourhood issues after the accession of Central and Eastern European states, or by reinforcing attention to the Western Balkans once countries from that region join. Enlargement as an external policy tool therefore permanently reshapes the internal map of interests.

In everyday language, one might say that enlargement blurs the line between “inside” and “outside”. What begins as foreign policy – offering a path towards closer association and eventual membership – gradually turns into domestic policy as candidate countries become member states. External conditionality becomes internal commitment. This makes enlargement a demanding and sometimes controversial instrument: it requires patience, consistency and a willingness to accept that external transformations will also transform the Union itself. Yet precisely because of this depth and mutual impact, enlargement occupies a central place in the system of the Union's external actions, linking its desire to project stability and norms beyond its borders with the ongoing story of its own integration.

3.2. The historical evolution of Enlargement Policy

From the very beginning, enlargement developed alongside the deepening of European integration. The first “waves” of accessions in the 1970s and 1980s – the United Kingdom, Ireland and Denmark, followed by Greece, Spain and Portugal – took place at the same time as important steps in internal market construction, monetary cooperation and institutional reform. Enlargement and deepening were not opposites; they reinforced each other. New members joined a project that was becoming denser and ambitious, while their accession, in turn, created the political momentum to adapt institutions and policies. In this early phase, enlargement was largely framed as a way to stabilise Western Europe, consolidate democracy after dictatorships in Southern Europe, and strengthen the economic and political weight of the Communities in the world.

The end of the Cold War opened a completely new chapter. Countries in Central and Eastern Europe, which had been on the other side of the Iron Curtain, expressed a strong desire to “return to Europe”. The Union responded by offering the prospect of membership, but under conditions that were much more demanding and detailed than in earlier decades. The so-called “big enlargements” of 2004, 2007 and 2013 brought twelve new member states, most of them post-socialist countries. These enlargements fundamentally changed the geography and balance of the Union. The Union expanded its borders eastwards, acquired new neighbours, and took on a much more visible role in shaping the political and economic order of the continent as a whole.

These big enlargements also had an internal meaning: they tested the capacity of the Union to absorb many new members while maintaining decision-making efficiency and policy coherence. They required major institutional reforms and led to new debates about budgetary solidarity, regional development and economic convergence. From the point of view of external action, they confirmed enlargement as a key instrument for stabilising fragile transitions and integrating diverse societies into a common legal and economic framework. At the same time, the scale and speed of these accessions generated concerns about how far and how fast

the Union could continue to grow without undermining its own functioning.

Over time, enlargement policy moved from a relatively technocratic exercise to a more openly political process. In the earlier waves, negotiations focused mainly on adapting sectoral policies and resolving practical questions: how to manage agricultural quotas, how to integrate national industries into the common market, how to phase in free movement. Political conditions such as democracy and respect for human rights were certainly present, but they were often assumed rather than constantly monitored. In the post-Cold War enlargements, by contrast, the political dimension became central. The Union developed detailed criteria on the rule of law, judicial independence, minority protection and the fight against corruption. Progress was evaluated through regular reports, benchmarks and action plans. Accession became not only a technical alignment with the *acquis*, but a deeper transformation of political systems and state institutions.

At the same time, domestic politics inside the Union gained more weight in enlargement debates. Public concerns about migration, labour markets, identity and the financial costs of integration influenced how governments approached new rounds of enlargement. Skepticism among parts of the electorate led to talk of “enlargement fatigue” and to a more cautious, sometimes hesitant, attitude towards extending membership further. This politicisation did not mean that enlargement lost its importance; rather, it meant that decisions about it could no longer be treated as mainly technical or elite-driven. They became part of broader conversations about what kind of Union citizens wanted, what values they were ready to defend, and where the external borders of the project should be drawn.

3.3. Principles, criteria and conditionality

The policy of enlargement rests on a set of principles and criteria that are meant to ensure that new members are ready to join and that the Union itself can continue to function effectively. These principles are not only technical; they reflect a particular

understanding of what kind of political and economic community the Union wants to be. At the heart of this framework stand the so-called Copenhagen criteria, the principle of conditionality, and the idea that the Union has its own limits of “absorption capacity”.

The Copenhagen criteria, formulated in the early 1990s, define the basic conditions that any country must meet in order to become a member. They are usually grouped into three broad categories: political, economic and institutional. The political criterion requires stable institutions that guarantee democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities. This includes free and fair elections, an independent judiciary, effective checks and balances, and safeguards for freedom of expression and association. The economic criterion calls for a functioning market economy and the capacity to cope with competitive pressure and market forces inside the Union. This implies macro-economic stability, a reliable legal environment for business, and progress in privatisation and structural reforms where needed. The institutional criterion refers to the ability to adopt, implement and enforce the entire body of Union law, including the willingness and capacity to participate fully in the Union’s policies and decision-making processes.

These criteria are not meant to be abstract declarations. They are operationalised through detailed assessments, monitoring reports and structured dialogues between the Union and each aspiring country. Progress is examined in specific areas, such as judicial reform, public administration, competition policy or anti-corruption measures. In this way, the Copenhagen criteria provide a common language for discussing reforms, identifying weaknesses and setting priorities. They also give domestic actors in candidate countries a clear reference point: they know what the Union expects and can use these expectations to support change at home.

The principle of conditionality connects these criteria to the broader logic of incentives and support. In simple terms, it can be summarised as “more reforms – more support”. The Union does not simply open its doors and wait; it offers financial assistance, technical advice and gradual integration into certain policies in exchange for concrete progress on reforms. When a country

advances in meeting the criteria, it may receive more funding, closer trade relations, or the opening of new chapters in the accession negotiations. When progress stalls or reforms are reversed, the process can slow down, be frozen, or in some cases even move backwards. This “reversibility” of the process is important. It signals that enlargement is not automatic and that commitments must be respected over time, not only at the moment of accession.

Conditionality is therefore both a carrot and a discipline. It gives governments a positive story to tell their societies: reforms bring the country closer to membership and unlock new opportunities. At the same time, it reminds them that membership is not a gift but a shared responsibility. For the Union, conditionality helps to protect its own legal and political environment. By insisting that new members reach a certain level of democratic and economic development before joining, the Union tries to reduce the risk that internal stability will be undermined by unresolved structural problems imported from outside.

Over time, enlargement policy has also developed a more differentiated approach to aspiring members. Not all countries are at the same stage of readiness or have the same type of relationship with the Union. Some are officially recognised as candidate countries, with formal accession negotiations either opened or expected. Others are considered potential candidates, which means that the perspective of eventual membership is acknowledged, but the conditions for starting negotiations are not yet fulfilled. In addition, some neighbouring states may have deep association agreements and strong trade ties without a clear or immediate membership perspective. This differentiation allows the Union to tailor its instruments to the situation of each partner, while keeping a degree of flexibility in how and when it moves forward.

Linked to this differentiation is the notion of the Union’s “absorption capacity”. This term captures the idea that enlargement is not only about whether a candidate country is ready, but also about whether the Union can absorb new members without harming its own ability to act. Absorption capacity has several dimensions. It includes institutional aspects, such as how more members will affect decision-making in the Council and the Par-

liament; budgetary aspects, such as the impact on agricultural and regional policies; and political aspects, such as citizens' acceptance of further enlargement. When debates about the pace and scope of enlargement become heated, references to absorption capacity often reappear. They express concerns that moving too fast, or taking in too many new members at once, could overload the Union's systems and weaken public support for the project.

In practice, these elements – the Copenhagen criteria, conditionality, differentiation and absorption capacity – form a delicate balance. If the conditions are too strict or the process too slow, candidate countries may become frustrated, and reform coalitions may lose strength. If the conditions are applied too loosely or the process is driven only by short-term geopolitical considerations, the Union may end up admitting members that are not fully prepared, with long-term consequences for internal cohesion and credibility. Managing this balance is one of the central challenges of enlargement policy. It requires patience, clarity and a willingness to combine strategic vision with careful attention to the realities of each candidate country and of the Union itself.

3.4. Procedures and instruments of enlargement policy

The policy of enlargement is not only about principles and criteria; it also relies on a clear set of procedures and practical instruments. These provide structure to the relationship between the Union and each aspiring country and translate the rather abstract idea of “moving towards membership” into concrete, manageable steps. From the Union's perspective, this structured approach helps to keep the process transparent and predictable. From the perspective of the aspiring country, it offers a roadmap that links political decisions to reforms and to tangible forms of support.

One important element is the status that a country holds in its relationship with the Union. At the most basic level, a state may be associated with the Union through an association agreement. Such an agreement typically provides for close political dialogue, deep trade integration, and cooperation in many sectors, but it does not

automatically imply a formal promise of membership. Some associated countries, however, are recognised as potential candidates, meaning that the Union sees them as possible future members, provided that they meet the necessary conditions. A further step is the formal status of candidate country, which is granted when the Union considers that a state has made sufficient progress in political and economic reforms to justify a more structured accession process. Beyond this point, the Union may decide to open negotiations on membership, which is a significant political act: it signals that the door is no longer only theoretically open, but that both sides are prepared to start working through the detailed conditions for entry.

Once accession negotiations begin, the process becomes highly structured and technical. The core of this process is the gradual examination and adoption of the Union's law and standards, grouped into thematic chapters or clusters. Each chapter covers a specific policy area, such as competition, environment, justice and home affairs, or agriculture. Before negotiations on a chapter can really start, the Union usually conducts a "screening" exercise. This means that experts from the Union and from the candidate country compare existing national laws and practices with the relevant part of the Union's legal order. The aim is to identify gaps, differences and areas that require reform. On the basis of this screening, the Union sets benchmarks that the candidate country must meet in order to provisionally close the chapter.

Negotiations on each chapter follow a similar pattern. The candidate country presents its plans for aligning with Union law, including timetables and, where necessary, requests for transitional periods. The Union evaluates whether these plans are credible and sufficient. If it is satisfied that the necessary reforms have been undertaken or firmly committed, the chapter may be temporarily closed. This closure is "provisional" because it can be reopened later if serious problems arise or if new Union legislation significantly changes the requirements. Only when all chapters are closed and the Union is confident that the candidate country is able to implement the *acquis* as a whole can the accession treaty be finalised. This treaty then needs to be signed and ratified by all member states and the candidate itself.

Alongside these legal and procedural steps, the Union provides a wide range of financial and technical instruments to help aspiring members prepare for membership. These include pre-accession funds that support investments in infrastructure, social development and economic modernisation, as well as specific programmes focused on strengthening public administration, the judiciary and regulatory bodies. Technical assistance may come in the form of expert missions, training programmes, and so-called “twinning” projects, where institutions from member states work directly with their counterparts in candidate countries. For example, a ministry of justice from an existing member may partner with a ministry in a candidate state to share experience on court administration, legal drafting or anti-corruption measures.

These instruments serve several purposes at once. They reduce the financial burden of reforms for candidate countries, making it easier to invest in new infrastructure, modern technologies or administrative reforms that are necessary for implementing Union rules. They also help to spread practical knowledge about how Union policies work in daily life, beyond the formal text of laws. Officials and experts from candidate countries can learn from the successes and mistakes of member states, and adapt solutions to their own context. In addition, the steady flow of projects and cooperation creates dense networks between people and institutions, which can later support a smoother integration once membership is achieved.

All these elements – status, negotiation procedures, and pre-accession instruments – are designed to make enlargement a gradual and controlled process. The Union does not simply wait until a country is “ready” and then invite it to join. Instead, it uses the very act of preparation as a tool of transformation. Each new law adopted, each institution modernised, each joint project completed brings the candidate country closer to the Union in practical terms. At the same time, the structured nature of the process gives the Union the possibility to pause, adjust or, if necessary, slow down progress when reforms stall or political conditions deteriorate. In this sense, the procedures and instruments of enlargement are not merely technical details; they are central to how the Union bal-

ances openness with caution and ambition with responsibility in its role as a transformative external actor.

3.5. Enlargement, neighbourhood and the borders of the EU

Enlargement policy does not operate in isolation. It is closely connected to the Union's broader approach to its neighbours and to the question of where, in political and geographical terms, the Union's "space" begins and ends. Over time, the Union has developed a set of policies that address countries which are close, but not necessarily on a clear track to membership. The most important of these is the European Neighbourhood Policy, which was designed to offer a structured relationship to states in Eastern Europe, the Southern Caucasus, and the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean. In practice, enlargement and neighbourhood policies form a continuum: they use similar instruments and language, but differ in the level of ambition and in the ultimate horizon they offer.

The European Neighbourhood Policy grew out of a simple, but powerful, idea: if the Union wanted to enjoy stability, prosperity and security, it needed a "ring of well-governed countries" at its borders. Not all of these countries could or would become members, but many of them were deeply affected by Union decisions on trade, migration, energy or security. The Neighbourhood Policy therefore offered a framework for closer political association and economic integration, based on shared values and on gradual alignment with parts of the Union's law and standards. In this sense, it borrowed from the logic of enlargement – conditionality, reform incentives, action plans – but without promising membership as the final reward.

This interplay is one of the key features of the Union's external strategy. For some countries, particularly in Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans, the Neighbourhood Policy or similar frameworks have functioned as a "waiting room" or a preparatory stage for eventual candidate status. For others, they are more likely to remain the main framework of their relationship with the Union for the foreseeable future. The line between "neighbour" and

“future member” is therefore not purely formal; it reflects political choices on both sides and can shift over time. This flexibility allows the Union to respond to changing circumstances, but it also generates uncertainty and, at times, frustration among partners who would like a clearer long-term perspective.

Because not every neighbour will become a member, the Union has developed a range of alternatives to full membership that still provide a high degree of integration. Association agreements, often combined with deep and comprehensive free trade areas, are one such alternative. They give partner countries broad access to the Union market, encourage regulatory convergence, and create regular forums for political dialogue, without placing the full set of obligations and rights of membership on the table. Other models include the European Economic Area, which extends the internal market to a small group of non-member states, and various forms of “privileged partnership” or “special status” that highlight political closeness and shared interests.

These alternatives can be seen as part of a wider search for differentiated integration in the Union’s surrounding space. Some partners are ready and willing to adopt substantial parts of the Union’s *acquis* in areas such as trade, competition or energy, while remaining outside the institutions. Others prefer looser cooperation around specific sectors, such as research, transport or security. The Union has tried to accommodate these differences by offering menus of cooperation, from basic trade preferences to deep free trade areas, from limited political dialogues to regular summits and structured security discussions. In all cases, however, there is a clear hierarchy: full membership remains the most far-reaching and demanding form of integration, while association and partnership represent more flexible, but also more limited, arrangements.

Behind these concrete policy instruments lies a more fundamental question: where do the borders of the Union – and of its enlargement space – actually lie? Geographically, the Union has always defined itself in reference to “European” states, but the notion of what counts as “European” is neither purely geographical nor entirely fixed. Politically, the answer depends on how far the Union is willing to extend its model of integration and how much

internal diversity it can manage without losing coherence. Historically, debates about the Union's "final borders" have returned regularly, especially when discussion turns to large or strategically sensitive countries. Some argue that the Union must keep the door open as broadly as possible, in line with its values and its desire to stabilise its wider region. Others insist on the need to recognise limits, both for reasons of identity and for reasons of institutional capacity.

This question of borders is not just theoretical. It has direct implications for how enlargement and neighbourhood policies are designed and justified. If the "space of possible enlargement" is understood as wide and flexible, then association and neighbourhood instruments may be seen as stepping stones, keeping options open for the future. If, by contrast, the Union leans towards a more restrictive understanding of its borders, these instruments may increasingly be presented as long-term alternatives to membership, offering closeness without inclusion. In practice, the Union has oscillated between these two visions, often adjusting its language and emphasis in response to internal public opinion, external security developments and the domestic evolution of partner countries.

For the neighbours, this ambiguity has both advantages and costs. On the one hand, flexible arrangements allow them to tailor their engagement with the Union to their own preferences and constraints. They can benefit from trade, investment, mobility schemes and sectoral cooperation without taking on all the obligations of membership. On the other hand, a lack of clarity about the ultimate horizon can weaken the motivational force of reforms and feed disappointment, especially in societies where "joining Europe" has become a central political aspiration. Managing expectations – neither over-promising nor closing doors too quickly – is therefore one of the most delicate tasks of the Union's external policy towards its neighbours.

In everyday terms, we can say that enlargement, neighbourhood and the question of borders are three sides of the same triangle. Enlargement is the most intense form of integration, neighbourhood policy provides structured closeness without full entry,

and the debate on borders sets the outer frame within which these options make sense. The Union's challenge is to use these tools in a way that supports stability, encourages reforms and respects the aspirations of its neighbours, while also preserving its own cohesion and capacity to act. The answer is not fixed once and for all; it will continue to evolve as the Union itself changes and as the political landscape around it shifts.

3.6. Contemporary debates and prospects of enlargement

Current debates on enlargement are marked by a deep tension between what is often called “enlargement fatigue” and a renewed sense of geopolitical necessity. On one side, parts of public opinion and some political elites in existing member states express scepticism about further rounds of accession. They remember the rapid succession of large enlargements, the financial and administrative costs of integration, and unresolved internal challenges linked to economic divergence, migration or political polarisation. For these actors, the Union already feels “large enough”, and the priority should be to consolidate what has been achieved rather than to extend membership even further. On the other side, geopolitical developments in the Union's neighbourhood – including instability, external interference and open conflict – have strengthened the argument that offering a credible membership perspective to certain neighbours is not only a matter of generosity or values, but also of strategic self-interest. From this viewpoint, enlargement is seen as a tool to stabilise fragile regions, to reduce the influence of rival powers, and to anchor neighbouring countries in a cooperative, rule-based framework that supports the Union's own security.

This tension runs through many concrete discussions. When the Union considers whether to open new accession negotiations, to grant candidate status or to move a country from one stage of the process to another, domestic debates in member states often reflect fears of “overstretch”, concerns about labour markets, or anxieties about cultural and identity issues. At the same time, the security situation in areas such as the Western Balkans or Eastern

Europe makes it difficult to argue convincingly that long-term stability can be achieved without a clear and credible European perspective. The result is a debate that oscillates between caution and urgency, between calls to slow down and calls to use enlargement more decisively as a foreign policy instrument.

A second major theme in contemporary debates concerns the challenge of protecting values and the rule of law, both before and after accession. The Copenhagen criteria and the principle of conditionality were designed to ensure that new members would enter the Union with solid democratic institutions, independent judiciaries and a robust respect for fundamental rights. In practice, significant progress has been achieved in many candidate countries through this framework. However, experience has also shown that reforms made under the pressure of accession can erode once membership has been obtained. Instances of democratic backsliding, threats to media freedom, politicisation of the judiciary or systemic corruption within some member states have raised difficult questions: how effective has pre-accession conditionality really been, and what can the Union do when core values are challenged from within?

These questions have a direct impact on the credibility of enlargement policy. If citizens in existing member states see that the Union struggles to ensure respect for its own values among current members, they may become more reluctant to accept further enlargements. If aspirant countries perceive that political considerations allow some states to escape consequences while others are held to stricter standards, they may doubt the fairness of the process. The Union has responded by strengthening monitoring mechanisms, exploring new tools to protect the rule of law, and linking access to funds more closely to respect for basic principles. Yet the underlying dilemma remains: enlargement is both a powerful instrument for spreading values and a potential source of internal tension if those values are not consistently upheld over time.

A third aspect of the contemporary debate concerns the specific regions that are currently at the centre of enlargement discussions and what they reveal about the Union's external role. The Western Balkans remain a priority, both because of their geographi-

cal position in the heart of Europe and because of their history of conflict and fragile statehood. For these countries, the European perspective has been repeatedly affirmed, but actual progress has been uneven and often slow. This creates a risk of disillusionment, which can be exploited by domestic actors or by external powers that offer alternative models or support. How the Union manages enlargement in the Western Balkans is therefore a test of its ability to combine consistency, patience and credibility in a strategically sensitive region.

Similarly, countries in the Union's Eastern neighbourhood that aspire to membership, such as some of the Eastern partners, bring enlargement policy into direct contact with broader security and geopolitical questions. Their reform efforts take place in an environment shaped by conflict, external pressure and complex domestic politics. Offering them a clear path to integration involves not only technical assessments of their readiness, but also difficult strategic choices about the Union's relations with other major powers and about the risks it is willing to assume in defending its vision of a peaceful, rule-based European order. In this sense, prospective enlargements in these regions function as a mirror of the Union's external identity: are we mainly a cautious market power that prefers limited, reversible commitments, or are we prepared to back up our values and promises with long-term engagement, even under adverse conditions?

Looking to the future, debates on enlargement are therefore not only about how many members the Union will have or how far its borders will stretch. They are also about what kind of international actor the Union wants to be. A Union that retreats from enlargement may gain short-term comfort but risk losing influence and credibility in its neighbourhood. A Union that pushes enlargement forward without addressing internal rule-of-law challenges and decision-making reforms may undermine its own coherence. The challenge is to find a middle path: one that keeps the transformative promise of enlargement alive, strengthens the mechanisms that protect shared values, and adapts institutions so that a larger Union can still act effectively. In this way, the future of enlargement policy will continue to serve as a barometer of both the Union's internal confidence and its external ambitions.

Questions:

1. How does enlargement function as an instrument of the EU's external policy rather than only as an internal administrative process of adding new members?
2. In what ways has the promise of EU membership helped to transform political and economic systems in neighbouring countries, especially in Central and Eastern Europe?
3. How did the early waves of enlargement in the 1970s and 1980s differ from the "big enlargements" of 2004–2013 in terms of scale, objectives and impact on Europe's political order?
4. What were the main internal challenges for the EU linked to the large post-Cold War enlargements, and how did they affect debates on the Union's future borders?
5. How do the Copenhagen criteria define the minimum standards for democracy, human rights, market economy and institutional capacity in aspiring member states?
6. Why is conditionality central to enlargement policy, and how does the "more reforms – more support" logic work in practice for candidate and potential candidate countries?
7. What is meant by the idea that the enlargement process is reversible, and why does reversibility matter for the credibility of EU conditionality?
8. How are the different statuses of association, potential candidate and candidate country used to structure the relationship between the EU and aspiring members?
9. What are the main stages and techniques of accession negotiations, including screening, chapters or clusters of the *acquis* and the provisional closure of chapters?
10. How do financial and technical instruments of pre-accession assistance support institutional convergence and administrative capacity in countries preparing for membership?
11. In what ways are enlargement policy and the European Neighbourhood Policy interconnected, and how can neighbourhood frameworks act as either a bridge to, or an alternative to, membership?
12. What kinds of "deep integration without full membership" have emerged as alternatives, such as association agreements with deep free trade areas or "privileged partnerships"?

13. Why is the question “where do the borders of the EU end?” so politically sensitive, and how does it influence the design of enlargement and neighbourhood policies?
14. How do concerns about “enlargement fatigue” interact with geopolitical arguments that further enlargement, especially in the Western Balkans and Eastern neighbourhood, is a strategic necessity for the EU?
15. In what sense do future enlargements towards the Western Balkans and Eastern partners serve as a test of the EU’s external role, its commitment to values and its capacity to act as a credible geopolitical actor?

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TOPIC 4: COMMON SECURITY AND DEFENSE POLICY

- 4.1. *Origins and legal foundations of CSDP*
- 4.2. *Institutional framework and decision-making in CSDP*
- 4.3. *Missions, operations and capability development*
- 4.4. *CSDP in the wider security architecture: partnerships, challenges and future directions*

The overall goal of Topic 4 is to help students understand how the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) fits into the evolution of the European Union from a purely civilian, economically focused actor to a Union that is capable of planning and conducting security and defence missions. The topic explains where CSDP comes from, how it is embedded in the EU's treaties and institutions, how missions and operations are organised in practice, and how CSDP relates to other parts of the European and global security architecture.

Expected learning results

After studying Topic 4, students should be able to:

- Explain the origins and legal foundations of CSDP, including the role of the Petersberg tasks and the treaty reforms from Maastricht to Lisbon;
- Describe the main elements of the institutional framework and decision-making in CSDP, including the functions of the European Council, the Foreign Affairs Council, the Political and Security Committee, and the key military and civilian planning bodies;
- Distinguish between the main types of CSDP engagements, such as civilian missions and military operations, and outline how these missions are planned, launched and supported; analyse why capability development and defence cooperation among member states are essential for credible CSDP action;
- and Critically assess how CSDP interacts with NATO, the UN and other partners, as well as the main contemporary

challenges CSDP faces in the context of new threats and the debate on the EU's strategic autonomy.

Key terms:

External relations – the broad field of the EU's interactions with the outside world, including trade, development, diplomacy and security, within which CSDP forms the specifically security-and-defence component;

Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) – the part of the EU's external action that covers civilian and military crisis management missions, defence cooperation and the gradual development of a European security and defence dimension;

Petersberg tasks – the set of crisis management missions (such as humanitarian and rescue tasks, peacekeeping and combat forces in crisis management) that provided the initial template for EU-led security operations;

Political and Security Committee (PSC) – the permanent ambassador-level body that monitors international developments, exercises political control and strategic direction of CSDP missions, and prepares decisions for ministers;

Civilian mission – a CSDP operation based on civilian experts, typically in areas such as police, rule of law, border management or security sector reform, aimed at strengthening local institutions rather than using military force; **military operation** – a CSDP engagement involving armed forces, for example in peace support, maritime security or training roles, conducted under EU political control but with national troops;

Capability development – the process through which EU member states improve and coordinate their military and civilian resources, often through joint projects and planning, in order to support CSDP missions more effectively;

Strategic autonomy – the ambition for the EU to be able to act on its own, when necessary, in security and defence matters, while remaining open to cooperation with NATO and other partners.

4.1. Origins and legal foundations of CSDP

The story of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) begins before the term itself existed. In the 1990s, European governments were confronted with a series of crises that exposed the limits of the European Union as a purely “civilian” power. The so-called Petersberg tasks, defined by Western European Union states in 1992, captured this new agenda. They described a spectrum of missions that fell below the level of full-scale war but clearly belonged to the security field: humanitarian and rescue tasks, peacekeeping, and tasks of combat forces in crisis management, including peacemaking. These ideas were a reaction to very concrete experiences – above all the wars in former Yugoslavia – where Europeans discovered that diplomatic declarations and economic tools were not enough to stop violence or protect civilians. The Petersberg tasks thus opened the door to thinking about a specifically European role in security and defence, focused on crisis management and stabilisation rather than traditional collective defence.

Legally and institutionally, this new dimension was gradually embedded in the Union’s treaties, starting with Maastricht and developed further in Amsterdam and Nice, before being consolidated under the Lisbon Treaty. The Maastricht Treaty introduced a Common Foreign and Security Policy, but security and defence elements remained vague and politically sensitive. Amsterdam integrated the Petersberg tasks into the Union’s framework and made it possible, in principle, for the EU to take over crisis management tasks that had previously been associated with the Western European Union. Subsequent reforms clarified procedures, created political and military bodies, and gave the Union a clearer mandate to plan and conduct civilian and military missions. Lisbon then gave the Union a single legal personality and confirmed CSDP as an integral part of the EU’s external action, linked to the broader objectives of peace, security, rule of law and multilateralism. Step by step, what began as an experiment in limited crisis management became a recognised policy area with its own legal basis and institutions.

Seen in this perspective, CSDP represents an evolution in the Union's self-understanding. For decades, the European project had defined itself as a "civilian power", relying on trade, law, development aid and political dialogue rather than on military instruments. The development of CSDP did not erase this identity, but it added a security-conscious layer to it. The Union acknowledged that in an unstable regional environment, and in a world of fragile states and complex emergencies, a credible external policy sometimes requires more than economic incentives and diplomatic statements. It may also require the ability to deploy police trainers, border guards, rule-of-law experts or, where necessary, limited military forces under the Union's flag. In this sense, CSDP is not a break with the EU's civilian tradition, but a response to the realisation that protecting that tradition – and the values associated with it – sometimes demands a capacity to act in the security field as well.

4.2. Institutional framework and decision-making in CSDP

The institutional framework of the Common Security and Defence Policy is built to keep security and defence firmly under political control while giving the Union enough structure to plan and run real missions. At the top of this system stands the European Council. When heads of state or government meet, they define the Union's overall strategic orientation, including in security and defence: they identify key threats, set priorities for regions and types of missions, and often send political signals about the level of ambition the Union should have. Their conclusions are not operational orders, but they create the frame within which more detailed CSDP decisions are later taken.

On the ministerial level, the Foreign Affairs Council is the main forum for decisions on CSDP. When defence issues are discussed, defence ministers of the member states participate, and the meeting is chaired by the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. It is in this configuration that ministers decide whether to launch a mission or operation, define its mandate, size and duration, approve rules of engagement and agree on how costs

are shared. They also review ongoing operations and adjust mandates when circumstances change. In between European Council summits and ministerial meetings, the Political and Security Committee plays a central role as a permanent ambassador-level body. Composed of representatives from each member state, it monitors international developments, oversees the political control and strategic direction of CSDP missions, and prepares decisions for ministers. In practice, it is the key bridge between daily diplomatic work and high-level political choices.

Beneath this political level there is a set of specialised military and civilian structures that provide expertise and planning capacity. On the military side, the EU Military Committee, made up of the Chiefs of Defence represented by their permanent military representatives, gives military advice to the Political and Security Committee and the Council. It is supported by the EU Military Staff, which conducts strategic planning, gathers intelligence, and prepares options for possible missions. On the civilian side, planning structures within the European External Action Service are responsible for designing civilian crisis management missions, such as police training, rule-of-law support or border management. Together, these bodies translate political priorities into concrete operational plans: they define objectives, resources, timelines and command arrangements, and they coordinate with member states' national structures.

Decision-making in CSDP follows a basic logic that combines common institutions with strong member state control. Proposals for new missions or for changes to existing ones can come from different directions: from the High Representative and the External Action Service, from one or more member states that see a need for action in a particular region, or from external partners such as the United Nations asking the EU to contribute to crisis management. These ideas are first examined technically and politically in the relevant working groups and in the Political and Security Committee. If there is sufficient support, more detailed operational planning is undertaken by the military and civilian staffs. Ultimately, however, it is the Council – that is, the governments of the member states – that must formally agree to launch any mission or operation.

Crucially, decisions in this field are taken by unanimity. Every member state has a say, and none can be forced to participate in a mission it fundamentally opposes. In some cases, a state may choose to abstain in a constructive way, allowing others to move ahead while not being bound by all aspects of the decision itself. Beyond the formal unanimity rule, member states retain control in other ways as well. They decide which national forces or experts to contribute to a mission and under what conditions; they remain responsible to their own parliaments for the deployment of personnel; and they participate throughout the life of a mission in the committees and councils that review its performance. This means that CSDP is, by design, a shared endeavour: it gives the Union instruments to act in the security field, but always within a framework in which member states remain the ultimate owners of both the political decisions and the resources deployed.

4.3. Missions, operations and capability development

CSDP missions and operations are the most visible expression of the European Union's role in security and defence. They show how political decisions and institutional structures are translated into concrete action in the field. Broadly speaking, there are two main types of engagements: civilian missions and military operations. Civilian missions usually work on issues such as police reform, rule of law, border management, security sector governance or monitoring. Their staff may include police officers, judges, prosecutors, border guards, administrators and other experts seconded by member states. The emphasis is on building institutions, supporting local authorities and strengthening the capacity of partner countries to manage their own security in a democratic and accountable way. Military operations, by contrast, involve the deployment of armed forces and are used for tasks such as peace support, maritime security, protection of vulnerable routes, training of local armed forces or support for the implementation of peace agreements. They are generally limited in size and scope, but they carry a different level of risk and require more robust planning and command structures.

The path from an initial idea to a mission on the ground passes through several stages. Often it begins with a political assessment: member states, the High Representative or partner organisations identify a crisis or a structural problem where EU engagement could add value. The Political and Security Committee then requests a more detailed analysis and possible options from the relevant planning bodies. On the basis of this work, the Council discusses whether a mission is appropriate, what its objectives should be and what resources it would require. If there is political agreement, a formal decision to launch a mission or operation is adopted. This decision sets out the mandate, duration, geographical scope and broad tasks. In parallel, operational planning continues: command and control arrangements are defined, rules of engagement are drafted, and member states are invited to contribute personnel and equipment. Once these elements are in place and minimum force levels or staff numbers are reached, the mission can be deployed. During its lifetime, it is regularly reviewed and adjusted in light of developments on the ground and lessons learned.

Behind every mission lies the question of capability: does the Union, through its member states, actually have the means to do what it has decided to do? This concerns not only the availability of troops, police officers or experts, but also strategic enablers such as transport, communications, medical support, intelligence and specialised equipment. For this reason, CSDP is closely linked to broader efforts in defence cooperation and capability development among member states. Through joint projects, coordinated planning and cooperation in the defence industry, member states try to reduce fragmentation, avoid unnecessary duplication and improve the interoperability of their forces. Initiatives in this field aim to ensure that when the Union decides to launch a mission, it can count on credible, well-trained and properly equipped contributions, rather than relying on ad hoc arrangements each time. In this way, missions and capability development form a circle: experiences in the field reveal gaps and needs, which feed into defence cooperation, and improved capabilities, in turn, make future missions more effective and more sustainable.

4.4. CSDP in the wider security architecture: partnerships, challenges and future directions

The Common Security and Defence Policy does not exist in a vacuum. It is embedded in a wider security architecture in which other organisations and alliances play central roles. For European states, the most important of these is the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. NATO remains the main framework for collective defence for most EU member states and for the transatlantic link with the United States. From the outset, CSDP was designed not to compete with NATO, but to complement it. The underlying idea is that NATO takes the lead in high-intensity collective defence tasks, while the EU, through CSDP, focuses on crisis management, stabilisation and civilian-military missions, especially in its neighbourhood and in areas where a broad mix of instruments is needed.

This complementarity has practical implications. The EU and NATO coordinate on issues such as capability development, planning and exercises, and they exchange information in areas like hybrid threats and cyber security. At the same time, cooperation with the United Nations and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe is crucial. Many CSDP missions are deployed in support of UN resolutions or alongside UN and OSCE operations. In such cases, the EU presents itself as a regional actor contributing to a wider system of multilateral security governance. It adds its own mix of tools – financial support, political dialogue, civilian expertise and limited military capabilities – to efforts led by global or pan-European organisations. This layered approach reflects the Union's preference for multilateralism and for working within agreed international frameworks.

Another important dimension of CSDP is the involvement of non-EU countries in EU-led missions and operations. Several partner states, including European non-members and countries from other regions, have taken part in CSDP engagements. They contribute troops, police officers or experts, participate in planning to some extent, and share in the practical and political burdens of crisis management. For the EU, such participation broadens the resource base for missions and strengthens the legitimacy of its actions beyond its borders. For partners, it offers an opportunity

to cooperate closely with the Union, to gain experience in multinational operations and to signal political alignment with European approaches to security. These partnerships turn CSDP into a more open framework, rather than a purely inward-looking project limited to member states.

Despite these strengths, CSDP faces significant contemporary challenges. One of them is political: member states do not always share the same threat perceptions or the same level of ambition for what the Union should do in security and defence. For some, instability in the Eastern neighbourhood and relations with Russia are the main concern; for others, developments in the Southern neighbourhood, terrorism, irregular migration or maritime security are more pressing. Reaching consensus on when and where to act, and how much risk and cost to accept, is therefore often difficult. This can lead to cautious mandates, slow decision-making or, in some cases, the absence of EU action where expectations exist.

A second challenge is material. CSDP depends on resources that remain largely under national control. Defence budgets have only slowly recovered after long periods of underinvestment; key capabilities such as strategic transport, intelligence, cyber defence or certain high-end assets are unevenly distributed among member states. Civilian capabilities, such as deployable police units or rule-of-law experts, also have limits and must be balanced against domestic needs. When multiple crises occur at the same time, it becomes clear how thinly spread these resources can be. Efforts to encourage defence cooperation, to coordinate planning and to strengthen the European industrial base aim to address these gaps, but progress is incremental and politically sensitive.

New types of threats add another layer of complexity. Hybrid tactics, cyber attacks, disinformation campaigns and the use of energy or critical infrastructure as tools of pressure do not fit neatly into traditional categories of war and peace. They blur the line between internal and external security and challenge instruments that were originally designed for more “classical” crisis management. In response, the EU has begun to integrate resilience, cyber security, strategic communication and the protection of critical infrastructure into its broader security agenda. CSDP is part

of this adaptation, but it must work closely with other EU policies and with member states' internal security systems to be effective against such diffuse and rapidly evolving threats.

In this context, debates about the future of CSDP are closely linked to the broader discussion on the Union's strategic autonomy. For some, strengthening CSDP – politically, institutionally and in terms of capabilities – is essential if the EU is to be able to act when its interests and values are at stake, especially in its neighbourhood, even if others are unwilling or unable to lead. For others, the priority is to avoid any duplication with NATO and to keep transatlantic ties at the centre of European security. The challenge is to reconcile these perspectives: to develop a more capable and more coherent CSDP that can shoulder greater responsibilities, while maintaining close cooperation with allies and staying anchored in a multilateral security order.

Looking ahead, the future direction of CSDP will depend on how the Union manages this balance. If member states can translate their shared recognition of a more dangerous and uncertain environment into concrete commitments – in terms of political will, resources and joint projects – CSDP is likely to become an increasingly important pillar of the EU's external action. If divisions persist and investments remain insufficient, its role may remain limited and largely symbolic. In either case, the evolution of CSDP will continue to serve as an indicator of how far the European Union is prepared to go in moving from a primarily civilian power towards a more strategically conscious security actor.

Questions:

1. How did the crises of the 1990s and the Petersberg tasks contribute to the idea that the EU needed its own security and defence dimension?
2. In what ways did the Maastricht, Amsterdam and Lisbon Treaties gradually transform security and defence from an experimental add-on into an integral part of the EU's external action?
3. Why can CSDP be seen as an evolution from a purely "civilian" external actor towards a more security-conscious Union, rather than a complete break with the EU's original identity?

4. What is the specific role of the European Council in setting the overall strategic direction of CSDP, and how does this differ from the role of the Foreign Affairs Council?
5. How does the Political and Security Committee (PSC) link day-to-day diplomatic work with high-level political decisions on CSDP missions and operations?
6. What functions do the EU Military Committee and the EU Military Staff perform in the planning and conduct of CSDP operations, and how do they interact with civilian planning structures?
7. Why is unanimity in the Council so important for decisions on CSDP, and what does this tell us about member states' attitudes to security and defence integration?
8. How can the mechanism of "constructive abstention" help the EU to act in CSDP even when some member states are reluctant to participate fully?
9. What are the main differences between civilian CSDP missions and military CSDP operations in terms of objectives, personnel and risk profile?
10. How is a typical CSDP mission or operation planned, launched and supported in practice—from the first political idea to deployment in the field?
11. Why is capability development and defence cooperation among member states essential for the credibility and effectiveness of CSDP missions?
12. In what ways is CSDP designed to be complementary to NATO, and how does cooperation with the UN and OSCE fit into the broader European security architecture?
13. What are the benefits and limitations of involving non-EU countries as partners in EU-led CSDP missions and operations?
14. How do new security challenges such as hybrid threats, cyber attacks and the instrumentalisation of energy and infrastructure reshape the agenda and tools of CSDP?
15. In the debate on the EU's strategic autonomy, what role is CSDP expected to play, and what political and practical obstacles stand in the way of a stronger CSDP in the future?

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TOPIC 5: EU'S EXTERNAL ECONOMIC RELATIONS

- 5.1. *The place of external economic relations in the EU system*
- 5.2. *Common commercial policy and trade agreements*
- 5.3. *External dimension of internal economic policies*
- 5.4. *Contemporary challenges in EU external economic relations*

The overall goal of Topic 1 is to help students understand how and why the European Union has evolved from a mainly economic community with limited external links into a complex international actor with its own foreign, security and defence policies, and how this evolution is connected to major historical turning points and changes in the global order.

Expected learning results

After studying Topic 5, students should be able to:

- Explain the main stages in the evolution of the EU's external relations, from early trade-based external ties to today's broader foreign, security and defence role.
- Identify how key historical moments (the Cold War, the end of the Cold War, the Balkan wars, the Maastricht and Lisbon Treaties, recent crises) reshaped the EU's external action.
- Distinguish between economic external relations, the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), and the development of a security and defence dimension.
- Analyse how the EU combines "soft power" tools (law, trade, economic cooperation, norms) with newer security and defence instruments.
- Reflect critically on the idea of the EU as a "normative power" and on the current debate about the Union's search for strategic autonomy.

Key terms:

Security and defence policy – the part of the EU's external action that deals with crisis management, civilian and military missions, and defence cooperation among member states.

Soft power – the ability to influence other actors not by force or coercion, but through attractiveness, norms, economic ties, cultural appeal and the promise of cooperation and benefits.

Normative power Europe – a way of describing the EU as an actor that seeks to shape international affairs by promoting its values and rules (democracy, human rights, rule of law) rather than primarily using military tools.

Maastricht Treaty – the 1992 treaty that created the European Union and introduced the Common Foreign and Security Policy, marking a shift from mainly economic “external relations” to a broader foreign and security agenda.

Lisbon Treaty – the treaty in force since 2009 that gave the EU a single legal personality and a more coherent structure for external action, helping it to act more like a unified global player.

Strategic autonomy – the ambition for the EU to be able to act independently, when necessary, in key areas of foreign, security, economic and technological policy, while still cooperating closely with partners and allies.

5.1. The place of external economic relations in the EU system

External economic relations sit at the very core of the European Union’s identity and legal order. From the beginning, the integration project was built around the idea of a common market with free movement of goods, services, capital and people. Once this internal market started to take shape, it became necessary to define how the Union as a whole would relate economically to the rest of the world. The common commercial policy emerged as the central legal instrument for this purpose. Under the treaties, trade policy – particularly trade in goods and increasingly also aspects of services, investment and intellectual property – is an area of exclusive Union competence. This means that only the EU can legislate and conclude international agreements in this field, and member states may not act independently in ways that contradict the common line. In other areas with an external economic dimension, competences are shared between the Union and the member states,

so that both levels play a role, but the Union still often acts as the primary negotiator and regulatory reference point.

The existence of a large, integrated internal market and, for many member states, a single currency amplifies the Union's influence in external economic relations. Because access to the EU market is so valuable, third countries have strong incentives to accept the rules and standards that govern it. When the Union negotiates trade and investment agreements, it is not only bargaining over tariffs and quotas; it is also projecting its regulatory model outward. Rules on competition, consumer protection, food safety, data protection, environmental standards and financial stability are written into international arrangements and thereby shape the legal and economic environment in partner countries. The euro, used by a significant part of the Union, reinforces this effect by providing a currency of denomination for trade, investment and reserves, and by linking monetary and financial stability in the Union to developments in the wider world. In this sense, the Union's "regulatory power" becomes a central feature of its external presence: other actors adjust to EU rules because they want or need to participate in its market.

Because of this, external economic relations form a crucial bridge between internal policies and foreign policy goals. Measures that are designed primarily for internal purposes – such as climate legislation, energy market rules, digital regulation or banking supervision – inevitably have external effects, especially when they create new standards that foreign firms must meet to access the EU market. At the same time, explicitly external instruments, such as trade agreements, investment frameworks or cooperation programmes, are increasingly used to support broader political objectives: promoting sustainable development, encouraging good governance and the rule of law, enhancing energy security or reducing strategic dependencies. Economic agreements often include political clauses; development and investment tools are tied to reform agendas; and trade preferences can be adjusted in response to human rights concerns or security issues. In this way, the external economic dimension is not a separate, technical chapter of EU policy, but a central channel through which internal pri-

orities, legal norms and strategic interests are projected into the wider international system.

5.2. Common commercial policy and trade agreements

The common commercial policy is the most developed and clearly defined part of the EU's external economic action. Its logic is straightforward: if member states share a single internal market, they also need a single external trade policy. Without a common approach to tariffs and market access, goods and services could enter the Union through the member state with the lowest barriers and then circulate freely inside, undermining any national trade policy. For this reason, the treaties give the Union exclusive competence over commercial policy. The EU, acting through its institutions, sets the common external tariff, negotiates trade agreements with third countries, and represents the member states in the World Trade Organization. This centralisation allows the Union to speak with one voice in global trade negotiations and gives it the weight of a large economic bloc rather than a collection of smaller markets.

In practice, the common commercial policy uses a range of instruments. At the most basic level are tariffs and other rules governing the entry of goods and services into the EU market. The Union decides which sectors enjoy lower tariffs under trade agreements, which products are subject to quotas, and how to treat imports from countries with different levels of development. Trade defence instruments, such as anti-dumping and anti-subsidy measures, are another important tool. They are designed to protect the Union's industries from unfair trade practices by allowing the temporary imposition of additional duties on goods that are sold below cost or benefit from distortive state support. Within the WTO, the EU defends a rules-based multilateral trading system, participates in dispute settlement, and engages in negotiations to update global trade rules. Its size and experience make it one of the key players in these processes.

Beyond multilateral rules, the EU has built an extensive network of bilateral and regional trade agreements. The simplest form is the classic free trade agreement, which gradually reduces or eliminates tariffs on industrial and, to varying degrees, agricultural products between the EU and a partner. More ambitious are association agreements that combine trade liberalisation with broader political and sectoral cooperation, often including institutionalised dialogues, financial assistance and reform commitments. In recent years, the Union has also developed deep and comprehensive free trade areas with some partners. These go beyond tariff cuts and aim at wide-ranging regulatory convergence, covering services, public procurement, competition policy, intellectual property rights and technical standards. They seek to integrate partner economies into the EU's internal market logic without granting full membership.

One of the defining features of EU trade agreements is that they export not only market access, but also regulatory standards. When the EU negotiates, it typically insists on provisions that reflect its own internal rules on competition, consumer protection, food and product safety, data protection, labour rights and environmental standards. Partner countries that want privileged access to the EU market must align their laws and practices with these requirements or at least commit to equivalent levels of protection. Over time, this leads to a form of "regulatory Europeanisation" beyond the Union's borders. Firms in partner countries adapt their production processes to meet EU norms; legislators and regulators in those countries reform their frameworks to comply with agreed commitments; and courts and administrations learn to apply concepts and procedures that mirror those used inside the Union.

This export of standards has both economic and political dimensions. Economically, it reduces transaction costs for companies operating across borders and creates more predictable conditions for trade and investment. Politically, it reinforces the Union's identity as a rule-based actor that seeks to shape globalisation according to principles of fairness, safety and sustainability. At the same time, it raises debates about the balance between openness and protection, about the effects on domestic producers and workers, and about the extent to which trade policy should be used to pro-

mote non-trade objectives such as human rights or climate action. In this sense, common commercial policy and trade agreements are not just technical instruments; they are central arenas where the Union's internal priorities, its external ambitions and the realities of global economic competition intersect.

5.3. External dimension of internal economic policies

Many of the Union's most visible external economic effects do not come from "foreign policy" decisions, but from policies that were originally designed for the internal market. Competition policy and state aid control are good examples. Inside the EU, these rules are meant to ensure fair competition, prevent abuse of dominant positions and restrict subsidies that distort the single market. However, they also have clear external consequences. Large multinational companies headquartered in the EU – or doing substantial business in the EU – must respect European competition rules, even when their practices affect markets outside the Union. Decisions by the European Commission in high-profile antitrust or merger cases are closely watched worldwide and can influence how companies structure their global strategies. Similarly, state aid rules increasingly shape how member states support firms that compete globally, for example in energy, transport or digital sectors, and create pressure on partner countries to adjust their own support schemes if they want to avoid conflicts with EU rules.

The external dimension is even more visible in sectoral policies such as energy, digital markets, transport, climate and environmental policy. Energy policy, for instance, is not only about internal market integration and security of supply; it also determines the Union's approach to external suppliers, transit routes and infrastructure projects. Choices about pipelines, liquefied natural gas terminals, interconnectors and renewable energy targets inevitably affect relations with neighbouring countries and major energy exporters. In the digital field, rules on data protection, platform regulation and cybersecurity shape how global technology companies operate and how data flows across borders. Transport

policy, including standards on safety and emissions, affects international airlines, shipping companies and logistics networks that serve the EU market. Climate and environmental policies, especially when they introduce carbon-related measures and strict product standards, have a direct impact on exporters to the EU, who must adapt their production processes and reporting systems to remain competitive.

Development cooperation, financial assistance and investment instruments provide another channel through which internal priorities are projected outward. The Union and its member states are major providers of development aid and financial support for reforms in partner countries. These funds are often linked to broader reform agendas inspired by EU internal policies: improving public financial management, modernising customs and tax administrations, strengthening regulatory agencies, supporting the green and digital transitions, or upgrading transport and energy infrastructure. Investment instruments, including guarantees and blended finance, are used to mobilise private capital for projects that align with EU standards and objectives, such as renewable energy, sustainable transport or digital connectivity. In this way, the external dimension of internal policies becomes a key tool for supporting economic reforms and deeper integration in partner countries.

Seen together, these different strands illustrate that the EU's external economic influence cannot be separated from its internal regulatory choices. Competition decisions, state aid rules, sectoral regulations and climate measures all radiate beyond the borders of the Union, encouraging partners to align their policies if they wish to maintain or deepen access to the EU market and to benefit from EU financial support. This gives the Union considerable leverage, but also creates responsibilities: internal rules must be designed with an awareness of their external effects, and external instruments must be used in a way that supports fair and sustainable development rather than simply exporting burdens.

5.4. Contemporary challenges in EU external economic relations

In recent years, the environment in which the EU conducts its external economic relations has become more unstable and contested. The multilateral trade system, centred on the World Trade Organization, is under strain. Negotiations on new global rules move slowly, dispute settlement has been weakened, and some major powers increasingly resort to unilateral tariffs, selective liberalisation and politically motivated trade measures. Trade tensions between large economies spill over into third markets, disrupting supply chains and creating uncertainty for businesses. At the same time, economic interdependence itself is being “weaponised”: access to markets, critical raw materials, technologies, payment systems or data flows is sometimes used as a tool of pressure or coercion. For an actor like the EU, which has long relied on rules-based economic openness as a foundation of prosperity and influence, this crisis of multilateral governance poses a direct challenge.

In response, the Union has begun to rethink the balance between openness and economic security. It remains strongly committed to open markets and global trade, but it is also developing new instruments to protect critical interests. Screening mechanisms for foreign direct investment, especially in strategic sectors such as infrastructure, defence-related technologies or sensitive data, have been introduced or strengthened to ensure that acquisitions do not undermine security or public order. Export controls are being updated to address dual-use technologies and to prevent sensitive items from contributing to military build-ups or human rights violations. Attention to the resilience of supply chains has grown, particularly after shocks linked to the pandemic and geopolitical tensions revealed vulnerabilities in areas like medical goods, semiconductors, rare earths and energy. The objective is not autarky, but diversification, transparency and the ability to withstand disruptions without being forced into unwanted political concessions.

These developments have pushed external economic policy to the centre of the EU’s broader geopolitical strategy and its debate on strategic autonomy. Economic instruments – trade agreements,

investment tools, sanctions, regulatory measures – are increasingly used not only to create prosperity, but also to protect critical technologies, reduce dependence on a small number of suppliers, and support partners that share similar values and interests. Decisions about where to source energy, how to regulate digital platforms, or with whom to cooperate on key technologies have clear political and security implications. The Union's search for strategic autonomy therefore has a strong economic dimension: the aim is to ensure that the EU can take sovereign decisions and defend its values without being constrained by excessive external dependencies.

At the same time, this shift raises difficult questions. How far can the EU go in using economic power for strategic purposes without undermining the open, rules-based system it seeks to preserve? How can it avoid sliding into protectionism while strengthening its resilience? How should it manage tensions between internal demands for social and environmental protection and external pressures for competitiveness and market access? The answers to these questions will shape the future of EU external economic relations and determine whether the Union can remain both an open trading power and a capable geopolitical actor in a more fragmented and competitive world.

Questions:

1. Why is external economic policy placed at the core of the EU system, and how does the common commercial policy reflect the logic of the single internal market?
2. What is the difference between exclusive and shared competences in the field of external economic relations, and why does it matter for who negotiates and signs trade agreements?
3. How do the size of the internal market and the existence of the euro strengthen the EU's bargaining position in external economic relations?
4. In what ways do EU competition policy and state aid control produce effects beyond the Union's borders, even though they are formally "internal" policies?

5. How do energy, digital, transport and climate policies acquire an external dimension when the EU regulates markets and sets standards inside its territory?
6. Why can climate and environmental measures (for example, carbon-related requirements or product standards) be seen as both internal regulation and external economic instruments?
7. How do development cooperation, financial assistance and investment instruments support economic reforms and a closer integration of partner countries with the EU?
8. What is the basic logic of the EU's common commercial policy, and why did member states agree to centralise trade policy at the EU level instead of keeping national trade policies?
9. How do different types of trade agreements (free trade agreements, association agreements with trade pillars, deep and comprehensive free trade areas) reflect different degrees of economic and regulatory integration?
10. In what sense do EU trade agreements "export" EU standards in areas such as competition, consumer protection, labour and the environment to partner countries?
11. What are the main symptoms of the current crisis of multilateral trade governance, and how do they affect the EU as a traditional defender of the WTO system?
12. How does the "weaponisation" of economic interdependence challenge the EU's traditional preference for open markets and rules-based globalisation?
13. Why has the EU introduced or strengthened instruments such as foreign investment screening and export controls, and how do these tools seek to balance openness with economic security?
14. What does "resilience of supply chains" mean in the EU context, and why has it become a key objective in external economic policy after recent global shocks?
15. How is the EU's external economic policy linked to its broader geopolitical strategy and search for strategic autonomy, and what tensions arise between defending values, preserving openness and protecting strategic interests?

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TOPIC 6: EU NEIGHBOURHOOD POLICY: EVOLUTION AND CHALLENGES

- 6.1. *Origins and logic of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP)*
- 6.2. *Instruments and governance of ENP*
- 6.3. *Differentiation and regional initiatives*
- 6.4. *Contemporary challenges and future directions of EU neighbourhood policy*

The overall goal of Topic 6 is to help students understand how the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) structures the EU's relations with its closest non-member states, what instruments and regional formats it uses, how it differentiates between very diverse partners, and which political and strategic challenges it faces in a changing regional environment.

Expected learning results

After studying Topic 6, students should be able to:

- Describe the core idea and guiding logic of the European Neighbourhood Policy as a framework for relations with Eastern and Southern neighbours without an automatic membership perspective.
- Explain how ENP is implemented through bilateral instruments (such as action plans, association agreements and trade arrangements), sectoral cooperation and financial support.
- Analyse why ENP has evolved from a uniform template to a more differentiated approach, including the role of regional initiatives such as the Eastern Partnership and the Union for the Mediterranean.
- Assess the main political and strategic challenges for ENP, including the impact of conflicts, fragile statehood, the presence of other external powers, and tensions between stability and governance reform.
- Discuss current debates on the future direction of ENP, including how it might be adapted after major geopolitical shocks and how it interacts with wider EU priorities such as

energy security, migration management and regional resilience.

Key terms

European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) – the EU’s framework for managing relations with neighbouring countries in Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus and the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean, offering closer political, economic and sectoral cooperation without an automatic promise of EU membership.

Action plan / Partnership priorities – a negotiated document between the EU and a neighbouring country that sets out agreed reform objectives, timelines and areas of cooperation, serving as an operational roadmap for implementing ENP.

Association agreement (ENP context) – a long-term treaty between the EU and a neighbouring state that establishes structured political dialogue, broad sectoral cooperation and, often, advanced economic integration under ENP.

Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) – a type of trade arrangement with an ENP partner that combines tariff reduction with wide-ranging alignment of laws and standards in areas such as technical rules, services and public procurement.

Eastern Partnership – a regional component of ENP focused on six Eastern European and South Caucasus countries, combining bilateral tracks with multilateral platforms for cooperation and dialogue.

Union for the Mediterranean – a regional framework that brings together EU member states and Southern partners to work on joint projects and policy dialogue related to the Mediterranean basin.

“More for more” principle – an approach in ENP whereby partners that make greater progress in agreed reforms and commitments receive more financial support, more access to EU programmes and more advanced forms of cooperation.

Differentiation (in ENP) – the practice of tailoring the depth and scope of EU–neighbour relations to each partner’s ambitions, capacities and political choices, instead of applying a single model to all neighbouring countries.

6.1. Origins and logic of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP)

The European Neighbourhood Policy was conceived as a response to a simple strategic question: how should the Union relate to the states that are close geographically, increasingly inter-dependent economically and politically, but not necessarily on a path to membership? After the major enlargement in the early 2000s, the Union found itself in direct contact with a wider circle of neighbours in the East and the South. These neighbours were facing a mixture of opportunities and vulnerabilities: economic transition, demographic pressure, unresolved conflicts, governance problems, and, in some cases, fragile institutions. The Neighbourhood Policy emerged as a way to structure relations with this wider circle in a more coherent and forward-looking manner, without automatically extending the promise of accession.

At the heart of ENP lies the idea of creating a “good governance belt” around the Union: a set of states with which the EU shares dense economic and societal links and with which it can manage common challenges in a predictable, rules-based way. The focus is not on institutional integration into the Union itself, but on aligning certain policies, standards and practices in order to reduce instability and foster mutually beneficial interdependence. The guiding assumption is that neighbours that are more prosperous, more effectively governed and more capable of managing their own security are also better partners for the EU. This logic translates into a combination of policy dialogue, economic opening and targeted support for reforms.

From the outset, ENP was explicitly designed not to be a “waiting room” for automatic membership. Its basic goals – stability, security and prosperity in the surrounding regions – were formulated independently of any accession perspective. This does not mean that membership is excluded for every partner, but it does mean that the Neighbourhood Policy, as such, is built around differentiated forms of close association rather than a single, linear path towards joining the Union. The EU offers deeper economic and sectoral cooperation, participation in selected policies and programmes, and increased financial support in return for progress

on political and economic reform, but it does not bind itself to a uniform final destination.

Geographically, ENP covers a broad arc of countries to the East and the South of the Union. In Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus, it engages states that are dealing with complex transitions and, in some cases, unresolved territorial disputes. In the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean, it addresses partners with very diverse political and economic systems, but with shared interests in trade, energy links, mobility and security at sea and on land. This diversity means that the policy cannot rely on a single template. Instead, the logic of ENP is to offer a flexible framework within which the EU can adapt the depth and scope of cooperation to the ambitions and capacities of each partner, while keeping the overall objectives of stability, security and shared prosperity in view.

6.2. Instruments and governance of ENP

The European Neighbourhood Policy is implemented through a dense network of bilateral and regional instruments, but its backbone is bilateral. With each partner country, the EU negotiates a set of documents that define common priorities, timelines and expected results. In the earlier phase of ENP, these took the form of detailed action plans, which listed reforms and cooperation areas in fields such as public administration, justice, economic regulation, education and infrastructure. Over time, for a number of partners these action plans were complemented or replaced by broader association agreements. Such agreements create a more formal and long-term framework for political association and economic integration, with joint institutions and regular review mechanisms. They provide a stable legal basis for applying the more specific tools of ENP and for monitoring how commitments are implemented in practice.

In some cases, association agreements are combined with deep and comprehensive free trade areas. These arrangements go beyond the simple reduction of tariffs. They aim at aligning a partner's economic rules and practices with those of the EU in areas such as technical standards, sanitary and phytosanitary rules, com-

petition, public procurement, intellectual property and services. In effect, they invite the partner country to participate in parts of the logic of the internal market without becoming a member. This regulatory and economic integration is demanding, but it offers significant benefits: easier access for exporters, a more predictable environment for investors and a clearer framework for domestic reform. Within the ENP, such deep trade components are a central instrument for linking economic cooperation with structural transformation.

Alongside these legal and economic frameworks, ENP relies on continuous political dialogue and sectoral cooperation. Political dialogue takes place at different levels: summits, ministerial meetings, senior officials' talks and thematic platforms. It allows the EU and its partners to discuss not only bilateral matters but also regional developments and shared concerns, from security issues to social challenges. Sectoral cooperation is organised around specific policy areas. In energy, partners may work with the EU on market reform, interconnection projects or renewable energy development. In transport, cooperation can cover infrastructure corridors, safety standards and regulatory convergence. In justice and home affairs, topics may include judicial reform, border management, police cooperation and data protection. Mobility, including visa facilitation and legal migration schemes, is another important area, often tied to commitments on document security, readmission and the fight against irregular migration. These sectoral dialogues make ENP concrete and practical, translating general objectives into technical and administrative work.

Financial instruments and conditionality give ENP its operational substance. The EU provides grants, technical assistance and investment support to help partners implement agreed reforms and projects. Funding can support, for example, modernisation of public services, infrastructure upgrades, education and training programmes, or measures to promote inclusive growth. The principle often referred to as "more for more" is applied in this context: partners that make more progress in reforms and in meeting jointly agreed benchmarks can receive more funding, more access to EU programmes and more ambitious forms of cooperation. Con-

versely, when reforms stall or commitments are not respected, the intensity of cooperation and the level of support can be reduced or redirected. This creates incentives for governments to move forward, while also giving the EU a way to react to negative trends without abandoning engagement altogether.

Governance of ENP involves a constant balancing act between common frameworks and tailoring to each partner. Joint bodies established by agreements – such as association councils and committees – review implementation, adjust priorities and interpret obligations. The European Commission and the European External Action Service coordinate within the EU, while working with member states to ensure that bilateral initiatives and EU-level action reinforce each other. Regular progress reports and assessments create a shared vocabulary for discussing achievements and shortcomings. In this way, ENP instruments and governance arrangements are designed to combine structure with flexibility: they provide a clear set of tools and procedures, but can be calibrated to match the ambitions, capacities and political realities of each neighbouring country.

6.3. Differentiation and regional initiatives

Over time, it became clear that a single template could not adequately capture the diversity of the EU's neighbours. Political systems, economic structures, security situations and societal expectations differed too much between countries in Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus and the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean. As a result, the initial "one-size-fits-all" approach of the European Neighbourhood Policy gradually gave way to a more differentiated model. In this model, the intensity and depth of cooperation depend both on the partner's ambitions and on its capacity and willingness to undertake reforms. Some partners are interested mainly in pragmatic sectoral cooperation, while others are ready to engage in far-reaching regulatory and economic integration. ENP has had to accommodate this spectrum, moving from a general framework to a set of tailored pathways.

Regional and sub-regional initiatives are an important part of

this differentiation. In the East, the Eastern Partnership provides a platform for six countries to engage with the EU both bilaterally and multilaterally. It combines individual tracks, where each partner negotiates its own level of association and integration, with joint formats such as summits and thematic platforms on issues like connectivity, governance or digital transformation. In the South, the Union for the Mediterranean offers a forum that brings together EU member states and Southern partners around regional projects in areas such as infrastructure, environment, energy and education. Other specific formats, including more limited regional initiatives, add additional layers of cooperation and dialogue. These frameworks recognise that many challenges and opportunities are regional in nature – for example, maritime security, energy corridors or cross-border environmental issues – and cannot be addressed purely through bilateral channels.

Within this differentiated landscape, levels of ambition vary significantly. Some partners opt for limited cooperation: they seek support and dialogue in selected sectors without aiming at deep regulatory alignment or political association. Others pursue much more far-reaching integration, including association agreements with deep and comprehensive free trade areas, partial access to EU programmes and close sectoral alignment. For a few Eastern partners, this is combined with an explicit or implicit hope of eventually obtaining a membership perspective, even if ENP itself does not formally guarantee this. This mix of models inevitably generates overlaps and tensions with other parts of the EU's external policy, particularly enlargement. Countries that see themselves as potential future members may find it difficult to accept that they are treated under the same ENP umbrella as states without such aspirations, while some member states fear that too much differentiation will blur the boundaries between neighbourhood policy and accession processes. ENP must therefore operate in a space where different external policies intersect, ensuring that the instruments it offers remain coherent, credible and responsive to the varied expectations of neighbours and member states alike.

6.4. Contemporary challenges and future directions of EU neighbourhood policy

The environment in which the European Neighbourhood Policy operates has become far more turbulent than its designers originally anticipated. Armed conflicts, contested borders and episodes of state breakdown have disrupted many of the assumptions on which ENP was built. In several partner countries, wars and unresolved territorial disputes have undermined institutional development, displaced populations and diverted resources from reform to basic survival. Elsewhere, the weakness or fragmentation of state structures has made it difficult to implement agreed policies, even when there is political will at the top. At the same time, other external actors – including Russia and a variety of regional powers – have expanded their presence and influence, offering alternative economic ties, security guarantees or political narratives. These developments complicate the EU's efforts to promote gradual transformation through dialogue, economic integration and targeted support.

One of the most persistent dilemmas for ENP is how to balance the pursuit of stability with the promotion of more open and accountable governance. On the one hand, the EU and its member states have a strong interest in avoiding further state collapse, large-scale violence or uncontrolled migration flows in neighbouring regions. This interest can push them towards cooperating with any government that appears capable of maintaining order, even if its democratic record is weak. On the other hand, ENP documents and instruments emphasise reform of institutions, respect for fundamental freedoms and the rule of law. When political openings occur, popular movements push for change or authoritarian practices intensify, the tension between these two objectives becomes visible. Choices made in such moments – for example, how to react to contested elections or to protests – affect the credibility of ENP and shape how societies in the neighbourhood perceive the EU.

Managing the expectations of partners is another major challenge. Some neighbouring states see cooperation with the EU primarily as a pragmatic way to gain market access, investment and technical support, without seeking a deeper political or institu-

tional bond. Others, especially in parts of the Eastern neighbourhood, interpret ENP and related frameworks as potential stepping stones towards a much closer integration, possibly including membership in the long term. For the former, the EU must show that meaningful benefits are available without over-politicising the relationship. For the latter, it must find a way to signal that serious ambitions and reforms are recognised and rewarded, without promising what it is not ready to deliver collectively. Striking a balance between these different expectations requires careful calibration of language, instruments and political messaging, and it is a constant source of internal debate within the Union.

In addition, ENP is increasingly intertwined with broader strategic priorities such as energy security, migration management and the EU's effort to reduce critical dependencies. Decisions about pipelines, electricity interconnections or renewable energy projects in neighbouring countries shape the Union's own energy mix and resilience. Arrangements on mobility, border management and returns have direct implications for how societies in the neighbourhood experience the EU in everyday life. Efforts to diversify sources of key raw materials or to secure digital and transport corridors often run through ENP partners. This interconnectedness strengthens the case for a more focused and coherent neighbourhood policy, but it also creates incentives to prioritise short-term functional cooperation over longer-term transformative goals.

Major geopolitical shocks have triggered repeated debates on the future of ENP. Conflicts in the neighbourhood, the effects of the "Arab uprisings," and other crises have revealed limits in the original design: the assumption of gradual, linear reform; the belief that technical tools alone could overcome deep political blockages; and the expectation that all partners would move broadly in the same direction at different speeds. In response, proposals for reform have ranged from a sharper differentiation between groups of countries, through a stronger emphasis on resilience and crisis response, to new forms of partnership for those who are willing and able to engage in very deep integration. The central question is how to adapt ENP so that it remains relevant in a more unpredictable and competitive regional setting; able to support those neigh-

bours that want closer alignment, able to work pragmatically with those that prefer limited cooperation, and able to protect the EU's own interests and values without overextending its commitments.

Questions:

1. What strategic problem was the European Neighbourhood Policy originally designed to address after the enlargements of the 2000s?
2. How would you summarise in one sentence the core logic of ENP as a framework for relations with neighbouring states that are not (or not yet) candidates for membership?
3. In what ways do bilateral action plans or partnership priorities translate the general goals of ENP into concrete reform agendas for individual partner countries?
4. How do association agreements under ENP differ from simpler cooperation agreements in terms of depth, duration and institutionalisation of EU-partner relations?
5. Why are deep and comprehensive free trade areas considered a “qualitative step” in economic and regulatory integration between the EU and some ENP partners?
6. How do political dialogue and sectoral cooperation in areas such as energy, transport or justice and home affairs make ENP more than just a trade and aid policy?
7. What does the “more for more” principle mean in practical terms for the allocation of financial support and access to EU programmes for neighbouring countries?
8. Why did the EU move away from a “one-size-fits-all” model of ENP towards a more differentiated approach, and what are the advantages and risks of this shift?
9. How do regional formats such as the Eastern Partnership and the Union for the Mediterranean complement, and sometimes complicate, the bilateral dimension of ENP?
10. In what ways can ENP relations range from minimal, issue-based cooperation to very deep integration, and what factors determine where a particular partner is located on this spectrum?

11. How do conflicts, contested borders and fragile state structures in some neighbouring countries constrain what ENP can realistically achieve?
12. What dilemmas arise when the EU must choose between prioritising short-term stability and supporting demands for political opening and institutional reform in its neighbourhood?
13. How does the presence of other external actors with their own agendas affect the EU's ability to implement ENP objectives in both the Eastern and Southern neighbourhoods?
14. Why is it difficult to manage the expectations of neighbours that seek a long-term membership perspective within a policy framework that does not automatically offer accession?
15. What main options are currently discussed for the future reform of the ENP, and how could these options help the EU respond better to geopolitical shocks while still promoting resilience and closer cooperation in its neighborhood?

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TOPIC 7: THE MODALITIES OF EURO-EAST INITIATIVES

- 7.1. *The “Eastern dimension” of EU external action: context and rationale*
- 7.2. *Key frameworks and formats of Euro–East cooperation*
- 7.3. *Instruments and practices on the ground*
- 7.4. *Current challenges and strategic prospects of Euro–East initiatives*

The overall goal

The overall goal of Topic 7 is to help students understand how and why the EU has developed a specific “Eastern dimension” in its external action, what concrete frameworks and instruments it uses to engage with Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus, and how Euro–East initiatives function as both tools of regional cooperation and tests of the EU’s long-term strategy towards the wider European space.

Expected learning results

After studying Topic 7 :

- Explain the historical and geopolitical context that led to the emergence of a distinct Eastern track in the EU’s external policies.
- Identify the main objectives of Euro–East initiatives, including stability, democratic transformation, energy security and connectivity, and discuss how these objectives interact.
- Describe the key frameworks and formats of Euro–East cooperation, with particular attention to the Eastern Partnership, association agreements and deep and comprehensive free trade areas.
- Analyse the role of sectoral dialogues (for example, in energy, transport, digital policy, justice, and home affairs) in turning political commitments into concrete cooperation.
- Assess how instruments on the ground – political dialogue, financial and technical assistance, mobility schemes, and security-related cooperation – operate in practice.

- Discuss the differentiation among Eastern partners, from those pursuing very ambitious integration with the EU to those preferring more limited sectoral cooperation.
- Evaluate the main challenges facing Euro–East initiatives, including conflicts, contested statehood, the presence of other external actors and tensions between normative objectives and hard security concerns.
- Reflect on how Euro–East initiatives serve as a test of the EU’s credibility and its capacity to shape the future of the wider European space.

Key terms:

Euro–East initiatives – the set of EU policies, frameworks and instruments specifically focused on cooperation with countries in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus, combining political dialogue, economic integration, sectoral cooperation and security-related support.

Eastern Partnership – the core regional framework that brings together the EU and a group of Eastern partners, with both bilateral tracks (individual country–EU relations) and multilateral platforms for joint dialogue and projects.

Association agreement (Eastern context) – a comprehensive treaty between the EU and an Eastern partner that establishes structured political relations, broad sectoral cooperation and, often, a far-reaching economic and legal alignment.

Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) – an advanced trade arrangement with an Eastern partner that combines market opening with extensive approximation of laws and standards in fields such as technical regulation, services and public procurement.

Sectoral dialogue – a structured form of cooperation in a specific policy area (for example, energy, transport, digital, justice and home affairs) where EU and partner experts work together on aligning rules, practices and projects.

People-to-people contacts – exchanges and mobility between citizens of the EU and Eastern partners, including visa facilitation, study and research programmes, youth exchanges and professional networks.

Resilience (Eastern neighbourhood) – the capacity of Eastern partners and their societies to withstand and adapt to shocks such as conflicts, economic crises, hybrid threats or political pressure, while maintaining core functions and reform paths.

Differentiation (Euro–East context) – the practice of tailoring the depth and form of EU engagement to each Eastern partner’s ambitions and performance, allowing for a spectrum from limited cooperation to very deep integration.

7.1. The “Eastern dimension” of EU external action: context and rationale

The “Eastern dimension” of EU external action grew out of a specific historical and geopolitical context. After the end of the Cold War, a group of states in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus emerged from the collapse of larger federations or empires, and faced the dual challenge of internal transformation and external repositioning. Some of them saw closer links with the EU as a way to anchor their reforms and to distance themselves from previous spheres of influence; others were more ambivalent or divided internally over their strategic orientation. For the EU, these neighbours were geographically close, economically interconnected and linked by transport, energy and human flows. Instability or conflict in this region could easily spill over into the Union, while successful transitions would create new opportunities for trade, investment and political partnership. Against this background, the EU started to develop a more focused “Eastern track” within its broader neighbourhood policy.

The main goals of Euro–East initiatives can be summarised as stability, democratic transformation, energy security and connectivity. Stability refers not only to the absence of open conflict, but also to the functioning of basic institutions, predictable governance and the ability of states to manage their borders and provide public goods. Democratic transformation is understood in a broad sense: fair elections, independent courts, effective parliaments, free media and space for civil society. The hope is that more pluralistic and accountable systems will be less prone to violent crises and

better able to cooperate with the EU on sensitive issues. Energy security is another key concern. Several Eastern partners are important transit countries for oil, gas and electricity, or potential suppliers and hubs for alternative routes and sources. Strengthening infrastructure, regulatory convergence and transparency in the energy sector is therefore a strategic objective for both sides. Connectivity adds an economic and social layer: modern transport corridors, digital links, research and educational networks are seen as ways to tie the region closer to the EU and to support growth and modernisation.

Euro–East initiatives are closely linked to, but not identical with, enlargement policy and the European Neighbourhood Policy. They occupy an intermediate space between the structured but open-ended framework of ENP and the more demanding, legally defined accession process. On the one hand, Eastern partners participate in ENP instruments: they negotiate association agreements, implement reform agendas, benefit from financial and technical assistance, and engage in sectoral cooperation. On the other hand, some of them also express a clear aspiration to move beyond neighbourhood status and to be recognised, at least in principle, as potential future members. Euro–East formats, such as the Eastern Partnership, are designed to keep both of these dimensions in play. They allow the EU to offer deeper integration to those willing and able to take on more ambitious commitments, without automatically placing every participant on a formal enlargement track.

In practice, this means that the “Eastern dimension” functions as a flexible layer in the EU’s external action. It provides a regional framework within which individual countries can develop their own level of engagement with the EU, ranging from limited cooperation in selected sectors to extensive alignment with Union rules and participation in EU programmes. At the same time, it gives the EU a platform to address issues that are inherently regional – such as cross-border infrastructure, shared environmental challenges or transnational security risks – in a more coordinated manner. The rationale is to combine the long-term perspective of transformation with the pragmatism required by complex geopolitical realities, while keeping the door open for closer forms of integration where both sides see them as desirable and feasible.

7.2. Key frameworks and formats of Euro–East cooperation

The central regional framework for Euro–East cooperation is the Eastern Partnership. It brings together the EU and a group of Eastern European and South Caucasus states in a structured but flexible format. The Eastern Partnership operates on two interconnected levels. On the bilateral level, each partner develops its own relationship with the EU, reflected in specific agreements, priorities and projects. On the multilateral level, all partners participate in joint summits, ministerial meetings and thematic platforms where region-wide issues are discussed. This dual structure allows the EU to acknowledge that not all partners have the same ambitions or capacities, while still creating a shared political space in which regional challenges and opportunities can be addressed collectively.

Within this framework, association agreements and deep and comprehensive free trade areas serve as “advanced” modalities of engagement for those partners that are ready for far-reaching commitments. Association agreements establish dense political, economic and legal ties. They typically include chapters on political cooperation, sectoral policies and justice-related issues, and create joint institutions to oversee implementation. When they are combined with deep and comprehensive free trade areas, the result is a particularly close form of economic integration. Partner countries commit to aligning large parts of their legislation and regulatory practices with those of the EU, especially in areas like technical standards, services, public procurement or competition. In return, they gain privileged access to the EU market and the possibility to participate in a range of Union programmes. In the Eastern context, these arrangements are widely seen as markers of a more ambitious, transformative relationship.

Alongside these overarching agreements, Euro–East cooperation relies on a dense web of sectoral dialogues and platforms. In energy, discussions can focus on market reform, infrastructure interconnections, security of supply and the development of renewables. In transport, cooperation may cover corridors, logistics, safety and regulatory convergence for road, rail and aviation.

Digital cooperation looks at issues such as broadband deployment, cybersecurity and approximation of digital rules. In the area of justice and home affairs, topics include judicial reforms, police cooperation, data protection, border management and efforts to tackle organised crime. These sectoral formats offer an opportunity for technical experts, regulators and practitioners to work together on concrete issues, turning political commitments into everyday administrative practice and creating communities of professionals familiar with EU approaches.

The interplay between multilateral and bilateral tracks is a defining feature of Euro–East initiatives. Bilateral relations allow the EU and each partner to move at a pace and depth tailored to their specific situation. They provide the space to negotiate detailed commitments, monitor implementation and respond to domestic developments. Multilateral settings, by contrast, create a forum for sharing experiences, discussing regional problems and launching joint projects that cross borders. They can also generate peer pressure and positive competition, as partners compare their progress and showcase reforms. Managing this balance is not always easy. Some partners prefer to emphasise their individual path and resist being grouped with others, while the EU seeks to maintain a coherent regional perspective. Nonetheless, the combination of bilateral and multilateral formats remains essential for addressing both country-specific needs and broader regional dynamics within the Eastern dimension of EU external action.

7.3. Instruments and practices on the ground

Euro–East cooperation becomes tangible through a mix of high-level political dialogue and everyday technical interaction. At the political level, regular summits and ministerial meetings set priorities, review progress and send signals to domestic and international audiences. These gatherings provide moments of visibility and commitment: leaders endorse shared agendas, adopt joint declarations and agree on future work. Around them, specialised formats – such as thematic ministerial meetings or senior officials’ dialogues – ensure continuity between summits. Parlia-

mentary platforms and civil society forums add a wider democratic dimension. They give elected representatives and non-governmental actors opportunities to scrutinise policies, raise concerns and propose ideas, helping to ensure that Euro–East initiatives are not limited to executive branches of government.

Financial and technical assistance is the main practical driver of reform and institution-building. The EU allocates funds to support changes in areas such as public administration, the justice system, economic regulation, education, health and infrastructure. Assistance can take the form of grants, budget support, expertise, twinning projects between institutions and investment tools that mobilise private capital. On the ground, this may translate into a reformed customs service, a modernised electricity grid, upgraded border facilities or new training programmes for judges and civil servants. Technical cooperation helps partner administrations to absorb complex reforms, interpret new legislation and adjust working methods. Over time, this sustained support creates networks of officials and professionals familiar with EU practices and standards, which facilitates further integration.

Mobility and people-to-people contacts provide a social and human dimension to Euro–East engagement. Visa facilitation and, where possible, visa liberalisation make it easier for citizens of partner countries to travel to the EU for study, work, business or tourism. Exchange programmes, scholarships, joint research projects and youth initiatives bring students, academics and professionals together across borders. These experiences can change perceptions, create personal ties and build constituencies in favour of closer cooperation. At the same time, they are often linked to improvements in document security, border management and migration governance in partner countries, so that increased mobility goes hand in hand with more orderly and predictable movement.

Security-related cooperation completes the picture. In regions affected by conflict, contested borders or fragile institutions, the EU supports measures to strengthen border management, improve resilience to hybrid and cyber threats, and assist in conflict-affected areas. This may involve training border guards, providing equipment, advising on security sector governance or supporting con-

fidence-building measures between communities. In some cases, the EU deploys civilian missions to help with monitoring, rule-of-law support or police reform. These activities are not isolated from the broader Euro–East agenda; they are designed to complement political dialogue, economic cooperation and institutional reform. The underlying approach is that long-term security in the Eastern neighbourhood is best achieved when physical security, good governance, economic opportunities and societal links reinforce one another rather than being treated as separate tracks.

7.4. Current challenges and strategic prospects of Euro–East initiatives

Euro–East initiatives unfold in an environment marked by conflict, contested statehood and intense geopolitical competition. Several Eastern partners live with unresolved territorial disputes, de facto partition or periodic violence, which profoundly shapes their domestic politics and their room for manoeuvre in relations with the EU. In such contexts, long-term reform programmes must coexist with immediate security concerns and humanitarian needs. At the same time, other external actors are deeply engaged in the region, offering alternative economic ties, security guarantees or integration projects, and sometimes using pressure or coercion to influence partners' choices. This makes Euro–East cooperation less a technical exercise and more a strategic endeavour, in which each step is interpreted against a wider geopolitical backdrop.

One consequence is a growing differentiation among Eastern partners. Some have positioned themselves as “frontrunners”, explicitly linking their cooperation with the EU to a long-term aspiration for deeper political and economic integration and, in some cases, for eventual membership. They are willing to undertake demanding reforms, accept extensive alignment with EU rules and invest political capital in a European path. Others prefer a more limited relationship, focusing on selected sectors such as trade, energy or mobility without seeking far-reaching commitments. Euro–East initiatives must accommodate this spectrum without losing coherence: they need to reward ambition and performance

where they exist, while still offering meaningful cooperation to those who choose a less intensive track. Managing this differentiation is a delicate task, as it influences perceptions of fairness, inclusion and hierarchy within the regional framework.

A further challenge lies in balancing normative goals with hard security concerns. Euro-East documents highlight principles such as pluralism, independent institutions and legal predictability. Civil society engagement, media freedom and judicial reform are presented as essential elements of a stable and resilient neighbourhood. Yet in a setting marked by conflict, military threats and external pressure, security imperatives often come to the fore. There can be moments when cooperation with actors who are not fully committed to these principles appears necessary to prevent escalation or maintain basic stability. Choices made in such situations – for example, whether to prioritise security cooperation with governments that face serious governance shortcomings – shape the credibility of Euro-East initiatives as vehicles for deeper transformation, and influence how they are perceived by local societies.

These pressures turn Euro-East initiatives into a test of the EU's broader credibility and strategic autonomy. If the Union presents itself as a long-term partner committed to supporting transformation and sovereignty in the Eastern neighbourhood, it must be prepared to sustain engagement even when conditions are difficult, costs are high and results are uneven. This includes maintaining a degree of consistency between rhetoric and practice: aligning financial, political and security tools with stated objectives, and avoiding signals that short-term expediency always prevails over agreed principles. At the same time, Euro-East initiatives force the EU to clarify how far it is willing and able to go in supporting partners that align closely with its approach but face strong external pressure. The extent to which the EU can act in a timely, coordinated and substantial manner in such cases is a concrete measure of its strategic autonomy.

Looking ahead, the strategic prospects of Euro-East cooperation depend on whether the EU and its partners can move beyond a reactive crisis-management mode towards a more proactive, shared vision for the wider European space. This would involve, on

the EU side, a clearer articulation of what forms of deep integration are realistically on offer for different groups of partners, how these forms relate to internal reforms within the Union, and how instruments across policy fields can be mobilised in a coherent way. On the partners' side, it requires sustained domestic commitment to reforms and an ability to navigate internal divisions and external pressures. Euro–East initiatives therefore operate not only as a set of policy tools, but as a laboratory in which the EU's long-term vision for its Eastern neighbourhood – and its capacity to implement that vision – is constantly tested and refined.

Questions:

1. How did the historical and geopolitical changes after the end of the Cold War create the need for a distinct “Eastern dimension” in the EU's external action?
2. In what ways do the main goals of Euro–East initiatives—stability, democratic transformation, energy security and connectivity—reinforce each other, and where might they come into tension?
3. How do Euro–East initiatives occupy an intermediate space between classical neighbourhood policy and the more demanding logic of enlargement?
4. What is the specific added value of the Eastern Partnership compared with purely bilateral relations between the EU and each Eastern partner?
5. Why are association agreements and deep and comprehensive free trade areas considered “advanced” modalities of Euro–East cooperation, and what do they require from partner countries in practice?
6. How do sectoral dialogues in areas such as energy, transport, digital policy and justice and home affairs make Euro–East relations concrete in everyday administrative and regulatory practice?
7. What are the main differences between the bilateral track and the multilateral track within Euro–East initiatives, and how do they complement each other?

8. How do summits, ministerial meetings and parliamentary/civil society platforms shape the political and societal environment of Euro–East cooperation?
9. In what ways do financial and technical assistance programmes support reforms and institution-building in Eastern partners, and what factors influence their effectiveness on the ground?
10. Why are mobility, visa facilitation and people-to-people contacts considered a strategic element of Euro–East engagement, rather than just a social or cultural add-on?
11. How does security-related cooperation in border management, resilience and conflict-affected areas fit into the broader goals of Euro–East initiatives?
12. In what ways do conflicts, contested statehood and the presence of other external actors complicate the EU’s ability to implement its Eastern agenda?
13. How does differentiation among Eastern partners—from “front-runners” with far-reaching aspirations to those seeking more limited cooperation—shape the design and politics of Euro–East initiatives?
14. What kinds of tensions arise between the EU’s normative objectives (democracy, rule of law, pluralism) and hard security concerns in the Eastern neighbourhood, and how can they be managed?
15. In what sense are Euro–East initiatives a test of the EU’s credibility and strategic autonomy, and what would success or failure in this region imply for the Union’s long-term vision of the wider European space?

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TOPIC 8: THE MODALITIES OF EURO-SOUTH INITIATIVES

- 8.1. *The “Southern dimension” of EU external action: context and rationale*
- 8.2. *Key frameworks and formats of Euro–South cooperation*
- 8.3. *Instruments and practices on the ground*
- 8.4. *Current challenges and strategic prospects of Euro–South initiatives*

The overall goal of Topic 8 is to help students understand how and why the EU has developed a specific “Southern dimension” in its external action towards the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean, which regional frameworks and bilateral agreements structure this engagement, which practical instruments are used on the ground (from financial support to mobility and security cooperation), and how Euro–South initiatives fit into wider debates on the Mediterranean, the MENA region and the EU’s own strategic priorities.

Expected learning results

- After studying Topic 8, students should be able to:
- Explain the historical, geographic and geopolitical context that shapes the EU’s relations with the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean.
- Identify the main goals of Euro–South initiatives, including stability, conflict management, energy and maritime security, migration and mobility, and economic development.
- Describe the key regional frameworks of Euro–South cooperation, in particular the Barcelona Process and the Union for the Mediterranean, and how they interact with bilateral association agreements and trade arrangements.
- Analyse the role of sectoral partnerships (for example, in energy, climate, transport, digital policy, education and research) in making Euro–South cooperation concrete and operational.

- Outline the main instruments used on the ground: political dialogue, financial assistance and investment tools, cooperation on migration and border management, and security-related projects.
- Discuss the impact of conflicts, authoritarian governance, and social inequalities on the effectiveness of Euro–South policies.
- Assess how other regional and global actors influence the Southern neighbourhood and how this affects the EU’s room for maneuver.
- Reflect on the place of Euro–South initiatives in current EU debates on energy diversification, migration governance, and strategic autonomy, and on possible directions for reform after repeated crises and the “Arab Spring” experience.

Key terms:

Euro–South initiatives – EU policies, frameworks and instruments focused on cooperation with countries in the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean, combining political dialogue, economic and sectoral partnerships, mobility schemes and security cooperation.

Barcelona Process – an early Euro–Mediterranean framework launched in the 1990s that sought to build a partnership between the EU and Southern partners around political dialogue, economic cooperation and social, cultural and human exchanges.

Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) – a regional organisation that brings together EU member states and Mediterranean partners to promote political dialogue and concrete regional projects in fields such as energy, environment, transport and education.

Association agreement (Southern context) – a treaty between the EU and a Southern partner that frames political relations, trade liberalisation and sectoral cooperation, and creates joint institutions to oversee implementation.

Mobility partnership – a framework that links facilitated legal mobility (for example, visas, study and work opportunities)

with enhanced cooperation on migration management, border control and the fight against irregular migration.

Readmission agreement – an arrangement between the EU and a partner country that sets out procedures for returning individuals who do not have the right to remain on EU territory to that partner country.

Migration governance – the set of policies, rules and practices through which states and regional organisations regulate legal and irregular migration, asylum, border management and integration.

Energy diversification (Mediterranean context) – efforts by the EU to broaden its sources, routes and types of energy, including through cooperation with Southern partners on gas, renewables and interconnections, in order to reduce dependence on a narrow range of suppliers and routes.

8.1. The “Southern dimension” of EU external action: context and rationale

The “Southern dimension” of EU external action is shaped by a long and dense history of interaction across the Mediterranean. Geography plays a decisive role: a relatively narrow sea separates EU member states from neighbours in North Africa and the Middle East, but this short distance masks significant differences in political systems, economic structures and demographic trends. Legacies of colonialism, long-standing cultural and religious ties, and overlapping security concerns form a complex backdrop to contemporary initiatives. For the EU, developments in the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean are never truly “external”: conflicts, economic shocks or social unrest in this region quickly translate into effects on energy markets, migration routes, trade, and even internal political debates within member states.

Euro–South initiatives are built around a cluster of interconnected goals. Stability and conflict management are central, given the frequency and intensity of crises in parts of the region, ranging from civil wars and regional rivalries to protracted unresolved conflicts. Energy and maritime security are equally important. The Southern neighbourhood includes key producers and transit routes

for hydrocarbons, as well as strategic sea lanes for global trade. Ensuring safe and predictable flows of energy and goods, and protecting critical maritime routes, is therefore a core interest for the Union. Migration and mobility form another crucial dimension. The Mediterranean is both a bridge and a barrier for people on the move, whether for work, study, family reasons or in search of protection. For the EU, this creates a need to combine humanitarian responsibilities, legal migration channels and cooperation on border management. Economic development underpins all of these objectives: without prospects for growth, employment and social inclusion, the conditions that feed instability and irregular migration are likely to persist.

Euro-South initiatives operate within, but are not limited to, the framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy. Many Southern partners are formally part of ENP and engage with the EU through association agreements, action plans and sectoral dialogues. At the same time, the Southern dimension is closely linked to the EU's broader approach towards the Middle East and North Africa, which includes relations with regional organisations, crisis diplomacy, development and humanitarian policies, and cooperation on security issues beyond the strictly neighbourhood label. This broader MENA strategy must take into account a crowded field of actors – regional powers, global players and international organisations – each with its own interests and agendas. Within this setting, Euro-South formats such as the Union for the Mediterranean serve as platforms where the EU tries to align its neighbourhood tools with longer-term regional objectives, seeking to move from ad hoc crisis responses towards more structured, mutually beneficial cooperation across the Mediterranean basin.

8.2. Key frameworks and formats of Euro-South cooperation

The institutional backbone of Euro-South cooperation is formed by a set of regional frameworks, of which the Barcelona Process and its successor, the Union for the Mediterranean, are the most prominent. The Barcelona Process, launched in the mid-1990s,

aimed to create a broad Euro-Mediterranean partnership based on three pillars: political and security dialogue, economic and financial cooperation, and social, cultural and human exchanges. It was an ambitious attempt to build a structured relationship between the EU and Southern partners that went beyond traditional development or security policies. The Union for the Mediterranean later reoriented this approach towards a more project-driven model, with a focus on concrete regional initiatives in areas such as environment, transport, energy and education, while preserving a framework for regular political meetings. Together, these frameworks provide a regional umbrella within which more specific Euro–South initiatives can be developed and monitored.

At the bilateral level, association agreements and trade arrangements with Southern partners give legal and economic substance to Euro–South relations. These agreements typically include provisions on political dialogue, gradual trade liberalisation, regulatory cooperation and, in some cases, limited mobility measures. They establish joint institutions – association councils and committees – that oversee implementation and allow for adjustments over time. Trade chapters open markets for industrial products and, to varying degrees, for agricultural goods and services, while creating incentives for partners to align parts of their regulatory systems with EU practices. In some cases, more advanced trade frameworks are negotiated, which deepen integration in selected sectors or address issues such as technical standards, intellectual property or public procurement in greater detail.

Sectoral partnerships add an important functional layer to this architecture. Energy cooperation focuses on issues such as cross-Mediterranean electricity links, gas infrastructure, renewable energy projects and market reforms that can support both supply security and the green transition. Climate-related initiatives may include joint work on adaptation, water management and emissions-reduction strategies. In transport, attention is given to port development, maritime safety, aviation agreements and logistics corridors that connect Europe with Africa and the broader Middle East. Digital partnerships look at connectivity, regulatory aspects of telecommunications and, increasingly, data governance

and cybersecurity. Education and research cooperation – through scholarship schemes, joint programmes and participation of Southern partners in EU research frameworks – helps to weave denser knowledge networks across the Mediterranean. These sectoral formats bring together experts, regulators and practitioners, making Euro–South cooperation visible in the everyday work of administrations, companies and universities.

The relationship between bilateral agreements and regional or multilateral formats is characterised by constant interplay rather than strict division. Bilateral agreements create tailored frameworks that reflect the specific circumstances and ambitions of each Southern partner. They determine the pace of trade opening, the depth of regulatory convergence and the scope of political dialogue. Regional and multilateral formats, by contrast, provide spaces where common challenges can be addressed collectively, cross-border projects can be launched and experiences can be shared. They can also help to ensure that bilateral arrangements do not pull the region apart into separate, incompatible tracks. For the EU, the challenge is to use these different levels in a complementary way: to allow differentiation where it is necessary, while keeping a sense of shared Mediterranean agenda and avoiding fragmentation of policies across the Southern neighbourhood.

8.3. Tools and practices in the field

On the Southern track, Euro–South cooperation becomes visible through a combination of political dialogue, financial and investment instruments, mobility arrangements and security-related projects. Political dialogue is conducted at several levels. Periodic summits and ministerial meetings set the broad agenda, reaffirm shared priorities and provide political backing for ongoing and new initiatives. Between these high-level encounters, officials' meetings and thematic working groups ensure continuity and follow-up on concrete files. Parliamentary fora and civil society platforms add another layer: they give space for elected representatives, NGOs, business associations and other non-state actors to discuss the direction of Euro–South relations, to raise concerns that might not

appear in official communiqués, and to contribute ideas from the ground. This multi-level dialogue is important in a region where public perceptions of the EU are often ambivalent and where legitimacy cannot be sustained solely through executive channels.

Financial assistance and investment tools are central to translating political commitments into change on the ground. The EU supports economic reforms, infrastructure development and social policies in Southern partner countries through grants, budget support and blending instruments that combine public funds with private capital. Typical areas include transport corridors, energy interconnections, water and sanitation projects, urban development and support for small and medium-sized enterprises. In recent years, the green transition has become a key focus: Euro–South cooperation increasingly funds renewable energy projects, energy-efficiency measures and climate adaptation initiatives. These investments serve a double purpose: they aim to foster more inclusive and sustainable growth in partner countries, and they help create a more resilient and interconnected Mediterranean economy that benefits both shores.

Cooperation on migration, mobility and border management is one of the most sensitive and politically salient aspects of Euro–South engagement. On the one hand, the EU seeks to facilitate legal mobility through visa facilitation, scholarships, labour schemes and youth exchanges, recognising that regulated movement can bring benefits for societies and economies on both sides. On the other hand, it works with Southern partners to manage irregular migration and combat smuggling and trafficking networks. This often involves support for border management systems, training for relevant agencies and readmission agreements that regulate the return of individuals who have no legal right to remain in the EU. Mobility partnerships and similar arrangements try to link these elements together: they offer partners a more structured and attractive framework for legal mobility and capacity-building in exchange for cooperation on irregular migration and border control. The delicate task is to ensure that such cooperation respects human rights and does not reduce Euro–South relations to a narrow focus on containment.

Security-related cooperation is woven through many of these activities, but also has its own specific instruments. In a region affected by terrorism, organised crime, piracy and diverse forms of instability, the EU engages with Southern partners on counter-terrorism, prevention of radicalisation, police cooperation and the strengthening of judicial systems. Maritime security is a particular priority in the Mediterranean and adjacent seas: efforts here include information-sharing, joint exercises, support for coast-guards and work on search and rescue capabilities. In situations of crisis or post-conflict recovery, the EU may deploy civilian missions or support crisis-management efforts led by other actors, providing expertise in areas such as border monitoring, rule-of-law support or security sector reform. Taken together, these practices show that Euro–South engagement operates on multiple tracks at once: it connects political dialogue with economic and social investment, links mobility with governance reforms, and embeds security cooperation within a broader vision of a more stable, connected and resilient Mediterranean region.

8.4. Current challenges and strategic prospects of Euro–South initiatives

The Southern neighbourhood presents a combination of structural problems that complicate the implementation of Euro–South policies. Persistent and often overlapping conflicts — civil wars, regional rivalries, unresolved territorial disputes— weaken state institutions, fragment societies and absorb political attention. In many cases, authoritarian or semi-authoritarian governance further limits the space for meaningful political participation, independent media, and civil society. Deep social inequalities, high youth unemployment and uneven development between regions within the same country create fertile ground for frustration, protest, and, at times, radicalisation. In such an environment, long-term reform programmes and carefully designed cooperation schemes face obvious obstacles: governments may lack both capacity and incentive to implement them consistently, while parts of the population may perceive them as remote from their immediate concerns.

This context brings to the surface a recurring dilemma for Euro–South initiatives: how to reconcile the desire for stability with the commitment to democracy and human rights. On the one hand, the EU and its member states worry about sudden breakdowns of order, sharp escalations of violence or large-scale displacement that could have direct consequences across the Mediterranean. This can lead to a preference for engaging with any leadership that appears able to maintain control, even if its record on fundamental freedoms is poor. On the other hand, stated EU principles emphasise inclusive governance, accountability and respect for individual rights. When protests erupt, regimes face internal challenges, or security forces employ repressive methods, the tension between these two logics becomes very visible. How Euro–South policies respond in such moments – whether they adjust financial and political support, and how they communicate their choices – shapes both their credibility and their long-term impact.

Another layer of complexity is the active role of other regional and global actors. Gulf countries, Turkey, the United States, Russia, China and various regional organisations all have their own agendas in the Southern neighbourhood. They offer alternative sources of funding, security assistance, ideological narratives and economic partnerships. Sometimes their initiatives complement EU efforts; in other cases they compete, pulling partners in different directions or reinforcing patterns of governance and economic dependency that run counter to EU goals. For Euro–South initiatives, this crowded landscape means that the EU is rarely the only, or even the dominant, external influence. It must position itself as a reliable and attractive partner in a marketplace of offers, without assuming that access to its market and funds alone will determine choices made by Southern states.

Internally, Euro–South engagement is increasingly linked to EU debates on energy diversification, migration governance and strategic autonomy. Decisions about renewable energy projects, gas supplies, hydrogen cooperation or interconnection of electricity grids in the Southern neighbourhood are no longer seen purely as development issues; they are tied to the EU’s own efforts to reduce critical dependencies and to build more resilient energy systems.

Similarly, negotiations on migration and mobility are shaped by intense political discussions inside the Union about solidarity, responsibility-sharing and the balance between control and protection. In the wider context of strategic autonomy, Euro–South initiatives are expected to help the EU act more coherently and independently in its immediate region, combining diplomatic, economic and security tools in ways that support both its interests and its declared values.

The experience of repeated crises and the lasting effects of the “Arab Spring” have prompted reflections on the future of Euro–South instruments. Initial expectations that relatively quick political openings would lead to linear transitions towards more inclusive systems have given way to a more cautious outlook, informed by cycles of upheaval, repression and fragile reform. This has led to proposals for reorienting Euro–South policies towards greater resilience, more realistic timelines and stronger attention to societal actors beyond central governments. Ideas under discussion include making support more conditional on concrete improvements in governance and human rights, while at the same time designing programmes that directly benefit local communities and vulnerable groups; refining regional frameworks to focus on a smaller number of high-impact projects; and improving coordination between the EU and member states so that messages and instruments are less fragmented.

Ultimately, the strategic prospects of Euro–South initiatives will depend on whether the EU can learn from past experiences and integrate them into a clearer, more consistent approach. This means acknowledging the limits of external influence, but also recognising the long-term importance of the Southern neighbourhood for Europe’s security, prosperity and identity. If Euro–South policies manage to combine patience with principled engagement, and flexibility with a sense of direction, they can remain a central pillar of the EU’s broader strategy toward the Mediterranean and the wider MENA region.

Questions:

1. How has geography and shared Mediterranean history shaped the way the EU thinks about its “Southern dimension” of external action?
2. In what ways do the key goals of Euro–South initiatives—stability, conflict management, energy and maritime security, migration and mobility, economic development—reinforce each other, and where do they clash?
3. What were the main ambitions of the original Barcelona Process, and how did the creation of the Union for the Mediterranean seek to adjust or reorient these ambitions?
4. How do regional frameworks such as the Union for the Mediterranean complement bilateral association agreements between the EU and individual Southern partners?
5. In practice, what distinguishes an association agreement with a Southern partner from a simpler cooperation or trade agreement?
6. How do sectoral partnerships in fields like energy, climate, transport, digital policy, education and research turn Euro–South cooperation into concrete projects and reforms?
7. What role do summits, ministerial meetings and parliamentary or civil society fora play in shaping the political and societal environment of Euro–South relations?
8. How does EU financial assistance and the use of investment tools support economic reforms, infrastructure development and the green transition in Southern partner countries?
9. Why is cooperation on migration, mobility and border management such a central and sensitive component of Euro–South engagement?
10. How do mobility partnerships and readmission agreements seek to balance facilitated legal movement with control over irregular migration, and what controversies do they generate?
11. In what ways do conflicts, authoritarian governance and deep social inequalities limit the effectiveness of Euro–South policies on the ground?
12. How does the presence and activism of other regional and global actors (such as Gulf states, the USA, Russia and China) shape the strategic environment in which Euro–South initiatives operate?

13. Why are debates on energy diversification and maritime security in the Mediterranean increasingly linked to the EU's broader ideas about strategic autonomy?
14. What lessons have been drawn from the “Arab Spring” and subsequent crises for the design and implementation of Euro–South instruments?
15. Looking ahead, what main options can be imagined for reforming Euro–South initiatives so that they remain relevant in a context of repeated shocks, contested governance and intense geopolitical competition?

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PART II: EU-EAST. THE EU AND SECURITY IN THE EASTERN NEIGHBOURHOOD

TOPIC 9: CONFLICTS OF THE REGION AND THE EU'S OPERATIONAL ROLE

- 9.1. *Mapping conflicts in the EU's wider neighbourhood: types, drivers, patterns*
- 9.2. *From political will to field presence: how the EU decides to engage in conflicts*
- 9.3. *Operational practices in conflict settings: working with local actors and managing risks*
- 9.4. *Evaluating the EU's operational role: effectiveness, dilemmas and future options*

The overall goal of Topic 9 is to help students understand how the EU operates in real conflict environments in its wider neighbourhood: how different types of conflicts are mapped and interpreted, how decisions to engage are made, how the Union works with local actors on the ground, and how its operational role is evaluated in terms of effectiveness, dilemmas and future strategic choices.

Expected learning results

After studying Topic 9, students should be able to:

- Describe the main types and patterns of conflicts in the EU's wider neighbourhood and identify key structural drivers behind them.
- Explain how the EU decides whether and how to become operationally involved in a given conflict, including the role of interests, feasibility and risk assessment.
- Distinguish between different possible roles for the EU in conflict settings (for example, facilitator, mediator, guarantor, supervisor, capacity-builder) and discuss when each role is appropriate.
- Analyse how mandates for EU engagement in conflicts are designed, including objectives, time horizons and benchmarks for success.

- Discuss the principles that guide EU operational practice in the field, such as local ownership, inclusiveness and conflict sensitivity.
- Identify the main types of local actors the EU works with in conflict-affected areas and evaluate the challenges of cooperating with each of them.
- Assess the operational risks involved in EU engagement in conflicts and explain how they can be managed in order to avoid doing harm or creating unintended side-effects.
- Reflect critically on what “success” can realistically mean for the EU in conflict environments and how operational experience feeds back into broader debates on the Union’s role as a peace and security actor.

Key words

Conflict typology – a way of classifying conflicts (for example, territorial, secessionist, state-collapse, hybrid, identity-based) in order to better understand their dynamics and implications.

Structural drivers – deep underlying factors such as weak institutions, poor governance, exclusion, and external interference that create conditions in which violent conflict is more likely.

Regional conflict system – a set of interconnected conflicts across several countries, linked by flows of people, arms, resources and narratives, rather than isolated crises.

Role choice – the decision about what kind of function the EU will perform in a specific conflict (facilitator, mediator, guarantor, supervisor, capacity-builder).

Mandate – the formal description of what an EU mission or initiative is supposed to achieve in a conflict setting, with defined tasks, time frame and expected results.

Local ownership – the principle that people and institutions directly affected by conflict should lead and shape the processes and solutions supported by external actors.

Conflict sensitivity – the ability to understand how any external action interacts with a conflict context and to minimise the risk of unintentionally worsening tensions.

Exit strategy – a plan for how and when an EU mission or ini-

tiative will hand over responsibilities and withdraw from a conflict environment without creating new instability.

9.1. Mapping conflicts in the EU's wider neighbourhood: types, drivers, patterns

Conflicts in the EU's wider neighbourhood do not follow a single model. In the East, many crises have a strong territorial or secessionist dimension: contested borders, breakaway entities, and disputes over sovereignty that remain unresolved for years. These are often described as "frozen" conflicts, although the term is misleading because incidents, escalations and human suffering continue even when front lines do not shift dramatically. In other cases, state institutions weaken to the point where the basic functions of government are no longer guaranteed, leading to partial or near-complete state collapse. In the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean, intrastate conflicts have frequently combined armed confrontation with deep societal polarisation, while hybrid forms of conflict blur the line between war and peace: proxy warfare, information campaigns, cyber operations and the instrumentalisation of migration or energy resources. Identity-based elements – ethnic, religious, linguistic or regional – often run through these disputes without fully explaining them on their own.

Behind this variety of forms lie a set of structural drivers that recur across contexts. Weak statehood is one of them: when institutions are fragile, politicised or captured by narrow interests, they struggle to mediate disputes peacefully or to provide fair access to basic services. Governance failures – corruption, lack of accountability, selective application of the law – erode trust and create incentives for actors to seek protection or advantage outside formal channels. Socio-economic exclusion, especially where large groups of young people see no realistic prospects for employment, participation or mobility, adds pressure to already strained systems. These factors alone do not automatically produce violent conflict, but they lower the threshold at which crises can turn into violence. External interference then typically acts as an amplifier: neighbouring states, regional powers, or global actors support pre-

ferred factions, supply resources, shape narratives and in some cases encourage hardline positions, making compromise more difficult and prolonging instability.

Importantly, conflicts in the EU's wider neighbourhood rarely remain neatly contained within national borders. They are better understood as parts of regional conflict systems. Weapons, fighters, money, ideas and information move across frontiers, linking otherwise separate theaters. A civil war in one country can spill over into its neighbours through refugee movements, cross-border crime or the spread of militant networks. Energy routes, trade corridors and communication infrastructure are affected by instability far away from the EU's direct borders. Alliances between armed groups and external patrons are often organised at a regional scale rather than country by country. This interconnectedness means that crises that appear local at first sight can acquire wider significance, influencing regional balances of power and creating new lines of tension. For the EU, mapping conflicts therefore involves more than identifying hotspots on a map: it requires understanding how different conflicts are linked, how structural drivers reinforce one another and how developments in one part of the neighbourhood can rapidly alter the risk landscape in another.

9.2. From political will to field presence: how the EU decides to engage in conflicts

The EU's involvement in conflicts in its wider neighbourhood begins long before any mission is deployed or any new initiative is launched. The first question is whether to act at all. This decision is shaped by how risks and opportunities are perceived. If a conflict threatens to destabilise a neighbouring region, disrupt important economic routes, trigger large-scale displacement, or undermine partners that are closely linked to the Union, the pressure to respond grows. At the same time, the EU must ask whether its engagement can realistically make a difference. This involves assessing the balance of forces on the ground, the openness of local actors to external facilitation, and the presence of other powers whose interests may clash with those of the Union. Feasibility

and risk assessment are central: even when interests are clearly at stake, it may be unwise to intervene if there is no credible path to influence events, or if the costs and potential unintended consequences outweigh the expected benefits.

Once the decision to become involved is taken in principle, the EU needs to choose what role it can and should play in a given conflict setting. Options range from light-touch facilitation, where the Union provides a neutral space and technical support for talks among local actors, to more active mediation, where it helps structure negotiations and proposes compromise formulas. In some cases, the EU may be invited to act as a guarantor of an agreement, taking on responsibilities linked to monitoring, verification or political backing for implementation. It can also assume supervisory functions, for example in overseeing specific reform processes, elections or sensitive institutional changes. In other situations, the emphasis may be on capacity-building: supporting local institutions in areas such as justice, policing, border management or public administration so that they become more capable of managing tensions and delivering services. The choice among these roles depends on the level of trust the EU enjoys among the parties, the resources it is willing to invest, and the space left by other international actors already present in the field.

Turning these choices into a concrete presence requires careful mandate design. A mandate defines what an EU initiative is expected to achieve, over what period, and with which instruments. Clear objectives are necessary to guide day-to-day activities, but they must also be realistic for a complex and fluid conflict environment. If they are too ambitious, disappointment and frustration are almost guaranteed; if they are too modest, the added value of engagement becomes questionable. Time horizons need similar calibration: in most conflicts, meaningful change cannot be delivered in a matter of months, yet open-ended commitments without periodic review risk mission creep and loss of focus. Benchmarks for success play an important role here. They translate broad objectives into observable developments, such as reductions in violence, progress in specific reforms, improved access to basic services or the establishment of functioning mechanisms for dialogue. At

the same time, mandates must include criteria and procedures for adaptation. As conditions evolve – positively or negatively – the EU must be able to adjust its tools, scale and focus without losing sight of the original purpose of its involvement.

9.3. Operational practices in conflict settings: working with local actors and managing risks

Once the EU is present in a conflict environment, the way it works on the ground becomes as important as the formal mandate. A central guiding idea is local ownership: durable solutions cannot be imposed from outside, they must be shaped and accepted by those who live with the consequences. This does not mean simply endorsing whatever local elites propose. Rather, it requires careful listening, understanding how different groups perceive the conflict, and creating space for them to define priorities and approaches. Inclusiveness is a second key principle. Conflict-affected societies are rarely homogeneous; they include groups with unequal access to power and resources, and with very different experiences of violence and injustice. If engagement focuses only on a narrow set of actors, especially those already dominant, it risks reinforcing existing imbalances and missing opportunities to support more representative and legitimate arrangements. Sensitivity to power asymmetries and conflict narratives is therefore essential. EU representatives need to be aware of how their own presence can shift local dynamics, and of how historical memories, grievances and identities shape perceptions of any external intervention.

In practice, this means building working relationships with a wide range of local actors. State institutions remain central: ministries, security agencies, courts and parliaments are the formal channels through which policies are made and implemented. Supporting their capacity and professionalism can be crucial for stabilisation and reform. At the same time, local authorities at regional and municipal level often have a more direct relationship with communities affected by conflict, and they can be key partners for projects related to services, infrastructure or reconciliation. Civil society organisations bring in additional perspectives:

they may represent victims, women, youth, minority groups or professional communities, and they often have detailed knowledge of local needs and sensitivities. Religious and traditional leaders, community mediators and informal networks can also play important roles in easing tensions or facilitating dialogue. Working with such a diverse set of actors requires patience, transparency and a willingness to adapt communication and methods to different audiences.

Operating in conflict settings inevitably involves risks, and managing these risks is part of daily practice. The physical security of staff is an obvious concern: movements may need to be restricted or carefully planned; offices must follow security protocols; and contingency plans are necessary for sudden escalations or targeted threats. However, risks are not only physical. The way information is collected, stored and shared can have serious implications. Poor information management can expose local partners to retaliation, undermine trust, or inadvertently fuel rumours and polarisation. “Do no harm” is a widely used principle in such environments, but it is challenging to apply in detail. Projects intended to support one group can be perceived as favouritism by others; technical advice on institutional design can shift the balance between different political forces; even the choice of where to hold meetings or which language to use can send signals that are interpreted politically.

To reduce unintended side-effects, EU staff must constantly reflect on how their actions interact with local dynamics. This includes conducting conflict sensitivity analyses, consulting widely before launching new initiatives, and being prepared to adjust or discontinue activities that produce negative consequences. It also means being honest about the limits of what external engagement can achieve and avoiding promises that cannot be kept. In this sense, operational practice in conflict settings is not a simple implementation of a fixed plan, but a continuous process of learning, adapting and negotiating, in which principles of local ownership, inclusiveness and prudence are tested against the realities of complex and often volatile environments.

9.4. Evaluating the EU's operational role: effectiveness, dilemmas and future options

Assessing whether the EU is effective in conflict environments is more complex than checking whether a project has been completed or a mission has ended on time. In such contexts, “success” rarely means a clean resolution of the conflict or a rapid transition to stable peace. More often, it is measured in terms of stabilisation, de-escalation and incremental improvements in resilience. Stabilisation may involve preventing a fragile ceasefire from collapsing, limiting the spread of violence to new areas or reducing the frequency and intensity of incidents. De-escalation can mean establishing channels of communication that allow disputes to be managed without resorting to force, or creating mechanisms for joint problem-solving between previously hostile actors. Resilience refers to the ability of institutions and communities to cope with shocks without collapsing — for example, maintaining basic services and legal procedures despite pressure, or managing local disputes without external intervention. In many cases, progress consists of small, cumulative steps: a more professional police unit, a functioning local council, an agreed protocol for managing a sensitive checkpoint. Evaluating such outcomes requires patience and a willingness to look beyond headline events.

In the course of this work, certain dilemmas appear again and again. One is the tension between impartiality and solidarity. On paper, the EU often presents itself as an impartial actor, treating all sides fairly and focusing on principles rather than camps. In practice, it may feel closer to one side, especially when that side has made clear commitments to values and reforms the Union supports, or when it is seen as the victim of aggression. Balancing these impulses — supporting partners under pressure without losing credibility as a facilitator or mediator — is a constant challenge. Another recurring dilemma is the choice between short-term stabilisation and long-term transformation. Measures that quickly reduce violence or migration pressures may entrench actors or structures that stand in the way of deeper reforms. Conversely, pushing too hard for rapid transformation can destabilise fragile arrangements and provoke backlash. A third dilemma concerns

exit strategies versus open-ended presence. Staying indefinitely risks dependency and fatigue, but leaving too early can undo years of work and signal abandonment. Designing “responsible exits” that hand over responsibilities to local actors without creating new vacuums is far from straightforward.

These experiences feed back into broader debates about the EU’s role as a peace and security actor. Over time, lessons from different missions and conflict engagements contribute to the development of internal doctrines, guidelines and training. They influence how future mandates are drafted, how risk is understood and shared among member states, and how different instruments – political, economic, security-related – are combined. They also shape the Union’s self-perception: whether it sees itself primarily as a cautious supporter of multilateral processes, as a more assertive regional stabiliser, or as something in between. Discussions about strategic autonomy and about the Union’s overall level of ambition in security policy are informed by concrete experiences: where the EU has acted early and coherently and seen positive effects, arguments for a stronger role gain credibility; where efforts have been fragmented or outcomes disappointing, calls for restraint or for a reordering of priorities become louder.

Looking ahead, the future options for the EU’s operational role in conflicts range from incremental adjustment to more fundamental rethinking. One path emphasises improving coherence and professionalism within the existing framework: better integrated planning, more realistic mandates, stronger learning loops and clearer communication with local populations. Another explores new forms of partnership, in which the EU works more systematically with regional organisations and local actors, sharing responsibilities and visibility rather than leading from the front. A more far-reaching option would link conflict engagement even more tightly to internal policies – for example, by making decisions on trade, energy or migration more sensitive to their impact on fragile settings. In all scenarios, the core question remains the same: how can the EU use its operational presence in conflicts not only to manage crises, but also to refine its understanding of what kind of peace and security actor it wants to be in its wider neighbourhood and beyond?

Questions:

1. How would you distinguish between territorial, secessionist, state-collapse, hybrid and identity-based conflicts in the EU's wider neighbourhood, and why does this typology matter for external engagement?
2. Which structural drivers of conflict—such as weak statehood, governance failures, socio-economic exclusion and external interference—do you consider most difficult for outside actors to influence, and why?
3. In what sense is it more accurate to speak of “regional conflict systems” rather than isolated crises when analysing the Eastern and Southern neighbourhoods?
4. What factors usually determine whether the EU considers a particular conflict serious enough to justify an operational presence on the ground?
5. How do assessments of feasibility and risk influence the EU's decision not only to act or not act, but also to choose a light, moderate or robust form of engagement?
6. Under which conditions is it more appropriate for the EU to act as a facilitator, and when might it instead be expected to take on a more demanding role as mediator, guarantor or supervisor?
7. Why is mandate design so crucial for the credibility of EU engagement in conflicts, and what are the risks of mandates that are either too ambitious or too narrow?
8. How can “local ownership” be put into practice in settings where local elites are divided, contested or themselves part of the conflict?
9. Why is inclusiveness (for example, involving local authorities, civil society, women's groups and minorities) essential for conflict-related EU initiatives, and what obstacles often prevent it from being fully realised?
10. What does it mean in concrete terms to apply “conflict sensitivity” and the “do no harm” principle when planning and implementing activities in a conflict-affected area?
11. Which operational risks—physical security, information handling, political manipulation, reputational damage—are most salient for EU staff in the field, and how can they be mitigated?

12. How can we define and measure “success” for the EU in conflict environments where comprehensive peace settlements are unlikely in the short term?
13. In what ways does the tension between impartiality and solidarity manifest itself in EU engagement with conflicts, and how can this tension be managed without paralysing action?
14. Why is it so difficult to design credible exit strategies for EU missions and initiatives in conflict settings, and what might be the consequences of exits that are either premature or excessively delayed?
15. How can operational experience in specific conflicts contribute to reshaping the EU’s broader strategic thinking about its role as a peace and security actor in its wider neighbourhood and beyond?

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TOPIC 10: ENERGY SECURITY IN THE BLACK SEA AND THE EU'S ROLE

- 10.1. *The Black Sea energy landscape: actors, resources and infrastructure*
- 10.2. *Risks and vulnerabilities in Black Sea energy security*
- 10.3. *The EU's toolbox for strengthening energy security in the Black Sea region*
- 10.4. *Geopolitics, green transition and future scenarios*

Overall goal

The overall goal of this topic is to help students understand the Black Sea as an energy region, where resources, infrastructure, risks and EU policies interact in a changing geopolitical and green-transition context.

Expected learning results

After studying this topic, students should be able to:

- Identify the main producer, transit and consumer countries in the wider Black Sea energy system and describe their basic roles.
- Outline key energy routes and infrastructures (pipelines, interconnectors, LNG, offshore fields) and explain why they are strategically important.
- Distinguish the main types of risks to energy security in the Black Sea and give simple examples of how they affect flows and prices.
- Explain in basic terms how the EU seeks to strengthen energy security in the region through diversification, common rules and financial–technical support.
- Discuss how decarbonisation and new technologies (renewables, offshore wind, hydrogen) may change the long-term energy and security outlook for the Black Sea.

Key terms:

Pipeline corridor – a main route made of connected gas or oil pipelines between regions or markets.

Electricity interconnector – a power line that connects the electricity systems of two countries and allows cross-border trade.

LNG (Liquefied Natural Gas) – natural gas cooled to liquid form for transport by ship and later turned back into gas.

Energy security – the ability of a country or region to have reliable and affordable energy supplies.

Diversification – using different suppliers, routes and energy sources so the system does not depend on just one.

Critical infrastructure – key energy objects (pipelines, ports, platforms, storage, power lines) whose damage would seriously disrupt supplies.

Decarbonisation – reducing greenhouse gas emissions from the energy system, mainly by moving away from fossil fuels to cleaner sources.

10.1. The Black Sea energy landscape: actors, resources and infrastructure



In the wider Black Sea region, the energy landscape is structured around a triangular relationship between producer, transit and consumer countries, in which coastal states and their hinterlands perform distinct but interdependent functions. The core littoral zone comprises Bulgaria, Romania, Ukraine, Russia, Georgia and Türkiye, while the broader regional frame usually adds Armenia, Azerbaijan and Moldova as well as the EU member states of South-Eastern Europe, which are closely integrated into Black Sea–Caspian energy corridors. On the producing side, Russia remains a major exporter of oil and natural gas with export terminals at Novorossiysk and links to offshore infrastructure in the

eastern Black Sea, although its role has been substantially affected by sanctions, the war in Ukraine and the progressive decoupling of European markets from Russian gas. At the same time, new upstream actors have emerged: Türkiye has brought on stream the Sakarya field and continues to announce additional offshore gas discoveries such as the recent Göktepe find; Romania and Bulgaria are advancing projects like Neptun Deep, Midia and Khan Asparuh; together these developments turn the Black Sea from a mere transit basin into a nascent production area that can contribute to regional diversification. Beyond the immediate littoral, Azerbaijan functions as the principal non-Russian gas supplier linked to the region, feeding the Southern Gas Corridor through the South Caucasus Pipeline, TANAP and TAP, which move Caspian gas across Georgia and Türkiye towards the EU market.

Transit countries form the connective tissue of this system. Türkiye has deliberately positioned itself as an energy hub, hosting multiple oil and gas routes—from legacy lines such as BTC and Blue Stream to newer infrastructures like TurkStream and TANAP—that bridge producers in Russia and the Caspian basin with consumers in South-Eastern and Central Europe. Georgia, while not a producer, is indispensable as a secure land corridor between Azerbaijan and Black Sea or Mediterranean outlets, underpinning both pipeline routes and electricity interconnections. Romania and Bulgaria act simultaneously as coastal states and overland transit nodes: offshore gas is landed on their shores and then injected into a growing mesh of interconnectors (such as BRUA and IGB) that channel volumes towards the Western Balkans and Central Europe. Ukraine historically occupied a central position as the main corridor for Russian gas to the EU, but the termination of transit through its system in early 2025 and the militarisation of parts of the Black Sea have sharply reduced this role and shifted flows to southern routes. Smaller hinterland states such as Moldova, as well as Western Balkan economies, are deeply affected by these reconfigurations because their supply security depends on how the transit architecture around the Black Sea is redesigned.

On the demand side, the principal consumers are the EU markets of South-Eastern and Central Europe, alongside Türkiye's rapidly

growing domestic energy demand. Romania and Bulgaria combine the roles of medium-sized producers and net importers; Greece and Italy appear in the regional picture as terminal markets for TAP and associated interconnectors; and landlocked EU members such as Hungary, Slovakia and Austria increasingly rely on south-north flows from the Black Sea–Caspian direction as alternatives to Russian routes via Ukraine. For non-EU neighbours—Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia and the Western Balkans—the Black Sea corridors are not only a physical supply lifeline but also a vehicle for regulatory and market integration with the EU’s energy acquis. In this configuration, coastal states control ports, offshore fields, LNG and pipeline landfalls, while the hinterland provides both additional production (Azerbaijan and potentially other Caspian states) and captive markets whose consumption justifies large-scale infrastructure. The result is an energy landscape in which the Black Sea functions less as a self-contained basin and more as a pivotal interface connecting Eurasian producers, multiple tiers of transit countries and heterogeneous consumer markets under conditions of high geopolitical and geoeconomic volatility.

Key energy resources in the Black Sea region are organised around several types of routes that link producers, transit states and consumer markets. Natural gas flows mainly through a system of large pipelines that connect Russian and Caspian fields with South-Eastern and Central Europe, including offshore and onshore segments across the Black Sea and neighbouring territories. At the same time, new offshore gas fields in the Black Sea, developed by Türkiye, Romania and Bulgaria, are gradually turning the basin into a source of regional production, with subsea pipelines bringing gas to coastal terminals and then into the wider transmission network. Oil is transported both by sea and by pipeline: tankers carry crude and oil products from Black Sea ports to Mediterranean and global markets, while overland routes from the Caspian area and Russia use the region as a corridor to reach refineries and terminals further west and south. Alongside hydrocarbons, electricity corridors are gaining importance: interconnectors between the power systems of EU member states and partner countries around the Black Sea allow cross-border trade in electricity, sup-

port integration of renewable energy sources and increase overall system stability. LNG, although still less central than pipeline gas, is becoming more relevant through regional terminals and swap arrangements that can redirect liquefied gas from global suppliers into the interconnected grids of South-Eastern Europe. Taken together, these pipelines, power lines, LNG facilities and offshore fields create a dense and interdependent network in which the Black Sea acts as both an energy route and an emerging production zone, rather than a simple transit space.

Strategic choke points and critical infrastructure make the Black Sea energy system both valuable and vulnerable. The most obvious choke point is the Turkish Straits – the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles – which form the only sea route between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean. Any restriction, accident or military tension in this narrow passage can delay or block the movement of oil tankers, gas carriers and supply vessels, with direct consequences for regional exports and imports. Inside the basin, key energy ports such as Novorossiysk, Constanța, Burgas, Varna, Odessa and Batumi work as critical nodes where oil and gas are loaded, stored or transferred to other routes. Damage to these ports, their storage facilities or loading terminals can break supply chains even if upstream production remains stable. Offshore platforms and subsea pipelines add another layer of critical infrastructure. They concentrate high levels of investment and technology in relatively small areas, are difficult to repair quickly, and are exposed to storms, technical failures, and deliberate attacks. Submarine electricity cables and cross-border interconnectors also act as strategic assets: they make it possible to balance power systems and trade electricity across borders, but they are hard to protect and easy to disrupt. On land, major compressor stations, pumping stations, and gas hubs close to the coast or at pipeline junctions become strategic bottlenecks because they control pressure and flow in the broader network. The combination of narrow maritime passages, highly concentrated port and offshore infrastructure, and a limited number of alternative routes means that resilience in the Black Sea basin depends on redundancy, physical protection, cybersecurity, and coordinated crisis management among coastal and neighbouring states.

10.2. Risks and vulnerabilities in Black Sea energy security

Risks to Black Sea energy security take many forms and often reinforce each other. Supply disruptions can result from technical failures, extreme weather, industrial accidents, sanctions, blockades or deliberate cuts in exports. Transit disputes arise when producer, transit and consumer countries disagree over tariffs, contract terms, arrears or the allocation of capacities; they can lead to pressure on flows, short-term interruptions or sudden rerouting of volumes. Infrastructure accidents add another dimension: explosions, leaks or fires on pipelines, compressor stations, storage sites, offshore platforms or terminals can remove key assets from operation for a long period and demand expensive repairs. Environmental hazards are especially serious in a semi-enclosed sea such as the Black Sea, where oil spills, gas leaks, or contamination from damaged facilities can spread quickly, damage ecosystems, and undermine local economies that rely on fishing and tourism. Hybrid and cyber threats further increase uncertainty: energy companies and network operators may face cyberattacks against control systems, GPS spoofing, interference with shipping, drone incidents, or sabotage that is difficult to attribute but can disrupt flows and erode trust between states.

A second group of vulnerabilities comes from strong dependence on a small number of suppliers or routes. When several countries rely on one dominant exporter or on one main corridor, they are exposed to price shocks and political leverage. Limited options reduce the bargaining power of smaller states and make it easier for powerful actors to link energy decisions with wider diplomatic or security demands. Concentration of flows in a narrow set of pipelines, ports, or straits also creates structural bottlenecks: any failure or blockage at one point can quickly cascade through the region and affect spot prices, storage strategies, and emergency measures. In this context, long-term contracts and sunk investments in existing infrastructure can slow down diversification, because they tie companies and governments to legacy routes even when they would like to shift to new suppliers or technologies.

Regional conflicts and maritime disputes have a direct and lasting impact on energy flows and investment choices in the Black Sea basin. Armed clashes, frozen conflicts, contested borders, and naval incidents increase the physical risk to offshore platforms, shipping lanes, and coastal infrastructure. Disagreements over maritime delimitation and exclusive economic zones complicate the exploration and development of offshore resources because companies face uncertainty about which state has the right to license fields and enforce regulations. Investors tend to demand higher risk premiums, shorten planning horizons, and may postpone or cancel projects when they expect instability, sanctions or damage to critical assets. As a result, some states and firms redirect capital to other regions or to less exposed sectors, including renewables and grid projects that can be built onshore and connected through diversified corridors. In this way, security tensions and legal disputes do not only disturb current energy flows; they also shape the long-term map of infrastructure and production in and around the Black Sea.

10.3. The EU's toolbox for strengthening energy security in the Black Sea region

The EU's approach to strengthening energy security in the Black Sea region starts from the idea of diversification in a broad sense. It is not only about changing the supplier of gas or oil, but also about building a more flexible system with alternative routes, sources and technologies. New or upgraded pipelines, reverse-flow capacities and LNG options can reduce dependence on a single corridor or a single exporter, while electricity interconnectors allow countries to import power from several neighbours rather than rely on one dominant source. Regional market integration, including cross-border capacity allocation and coordinated operation of transmission systems, makes it easier to redirect flows when one route is blocked or a supplier becomes unreliable. Underground gas storage and oil storage facilities, placed at strategic locations in and around the Black Sea, provide a buffer during peak demand, price spikes or temporary interruptions; they also give smaller

states more room to negotiate contracts and avoid emergency purchases on unfavourable terms.

Alongside physical diversification, the EU promotes a set of regulatory and market instruments designed to make the regional energy environment more transparent and competitive. Alignment with EU energy rules, including the principles of the internal energy market, supports the gradual convergence of laws and practices in neighbouring countries with those of EU member states. This involves clear rules for third-party access to networks, non-discriminatory tariffs and transparent licensing procedures. Unbundling of transmission from production and supply, where implemented, helps to prevent vertically integrated companies from using control over pipelines or grids to exclude competitors. Stronger competition rules and independent regulators in the region are intended to reduce the space for opaque deals and to limit the use of energy as a political tool. In this way, the legal and institutional framework becomes part of the security toolbox: it reduces the risk that infrastructure controlled by one actor can be used to exert pressure on others.

Finally, the EU relies on financial and technical support to turn these strategic ideas into concrete projects on the ground. European funding instruments, development banks and specialised facilities can co-finance interconnectors, modernisation of grids, smart metering, new storage capacities and cross-border infrastructure that might be too costly or risky for national budgets alone. Technical assistance programmes help partner countries in the Black Sea region to prepare feasibility studies, design bankable projects and adopt modern standards for system operation, safety and environmental performance. At the same time, a growing share of support is directed towards low-carbon projects, such as renewable energy installations, offshore wind, improved energy efficiency in buildings and industry, and the integration of variable renewables into regional power systems. By combining support for diversification, regulatory reform and decarbonisation, the EU seeks to build an energy system in the Black Sea region that is not only more secure in the short term, but also more sustainable and resilient in the long term.

10.4. Geopolitics, green transition and future scenarios

The role of major external and regional players in the Black Sea energy system will remain central for any future scenario. The European Union is both a nearby market and a regulatory power: it shapes demand through its internal policies on gas, oil and electricity, and it exports rules through its neighbourhood, enlargement and Energy Community frameworks. Russia continues to matter as a key producer with long experience in pipeline diplomacy, even if its relative weight decreases over time because of sanctions, diversification and changing demand in Europe. Türkiye acts as a regional pivot, combining the roles of littoral state, transit corridor and emerging gas hub, and it uses this position to increase its diplomatic and economic influence. Countries such as Ukraine, Romania, Bulgaria, Georgia and Azerbaijan contribute to this complex picture as coastal or hinterland actors that host infrastructure, develop offshore and onshore resources, and seek to balance security interests with economic opportunities. External players like the United States and, to a lesser extent, China also affect the regional landscape through political support, defence cooperation, investments, technology transfer and competition over standards in new energy sectors.

Decarbonisation and the spread of new technologies gradually change the strategic logic of energy in the Black Sea basin. As the EU and its neighbours reduce the share of fossil fuels and increase the role of renewables, traditional oil and gas routes may lose some of their long-term importance, even if they remain relevant in the medium term. Offshore wind, if developed at scale, can turn parts of the Black Sea into major production zones for green electricity that is exported via subsea cables and regional interconnectors. Hydrogen, produced from renewable power or with low-carbon methods, may create new value chains in which ports, industrial clusters and storage sites become as important as classic pipeline junctions. Digital technologies, smart grids and demand-response tools allow a more flexible use of networks and help to stabilise systems with a high share of variable renewables. In this emerging context, control over pipelines is no longer the only or main source

of leverage; instead, access to clean technologies, grid integration, innovation capacity and standard-setting in areas such as hydrogen certification become new dimensions of power and influence.

The Black Sea can therefore be seen as a test case for the EU's broader approach to energy security, strategic autonomy and regional cooperation. If the Union manages to combine diversification away from risky suppliers with deep decarbonisation and closer cooperation with neighbouring states, the region could illustrate how security and climate goals can reinforce each other rather than compete. A positive scenario would involve gradual settlement or effective management of conflicts, stable rules for maritime zones, strong regional institutions and a dense network of interconnectors, storage sites and renewable projects built on common standards. A less favourable scenario would see fragmentation, persistent disputes, selective alignment with EU rules, and parallel systems promoted by competing external powers, which would slow down investment and maintain high vulnerability to shocks. Between these extremes, mixed paths are also possible, with pockets of advanced green integration around some coastal states and slower, more politicised transitions elsewhere. In all cases, the way the EU and its partners handle energy in the Black Sea will send a wider signal about the credibility of European ambitions in security, climate leadership and neighbourhood policy.

Questions:

1. Which states can be considered the main producer, transit and consumer countries in the wider Black Sea region, and how do their roles differ?
2. Why is the Black Sea often described as both an energy route and an emerging production zone rather than a simple transit corridor?
3. What are the main advantages and limitations of pipeline-based energy transport compared with LNG and electricity interconnectors in the Black Sea context?
4. How do strategic choke points such as the Turkish Straits influence the security and reliability of energy flows from and through the Black Sea?

5. In what ways can supply disruptions, transit disputes and infrastructure accidents interact and reinforce each other in creating regional energy crises?
6. Why are environmental hazards in the Black Sea, such as oil spills or damage to offshore platforms, particularly problematic for local societies and ecosystems?
7. How does a high dependence on a limited number of suppliers or routes affect the bargaining position and political vulnerability of small and medium-sized states in the region?
8. What types of hybrid and cyber threats are relevant for energy infrastructure in and around the Black Sea, and why are they difficult to manage?
9. How do regional conflicts and maritime disputes shape investor decisions regarding new pipelines, offshore projects and renewable energy installations?
10. Which elements of the EU's diversification strategy are most relevant for improving energy security in the Black Sea region?
11. How can alignment with EU energy rules and unbundling of transmission from supply contribute to greater transparency and competition in regional energy markets?
12. What forms of financial and technical support can the EU provide to partner countries in the Black Sea area, and how do these instruments support both security and the green transition?
13. In what ways might large-scale deployment of offshore wind and green hydrogen change the strategic importance of traditional oil and gas routes in the Black Sea basin?
14. How can the Black Sea region illustrate the potential synergies and tensions between energy security goals and climate-neutrality objectives of the EU?
15. Which future scenario for the Black Sea energy system do you consider most plausible (cooperative green integration, fragmented competition, or a mixed pattern), and what arguments support your assessment?

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TOPIC 11: EU-UKRAINE RELATIONS AND RUSSIAN POLICIES

- 11.1. *Evolution of EU–Ukraine relations: from partnership to association and beyond*
- 11.2. *Russian policies towards Ukraine and the EU: instruments, narratives, pressure*
- 11.3. *EU responses to the Ukraine–Russia conflict: support, sanctions, security and reconstruction*
- 11.4. *Future of EU–Ukraine relations and implications for the European order*

Overall goal

The overall goal of this topic is to help students understand how EU–Ukraine relations have moved from partnership to association and towards membership, how Russian policies and the war have shaped this process, and what this means for the future European order and the EU’s role as a geopolitical actor.

Expected learning results

After studying this topic, students should be able to:

- Describe the main stages in the evolution of EU–Ukraine relations and explain why each stage was important.
- Explain key instruments and narratives of Russian policy towards Ukraine and the EU, including military, economic and information tools.
- Identify and summarise the main elements of the EU’s response: political, economic and security support for Ukraine, as well as sanctions on Russia.
- Discuss Ukraine’s EU membership perspective, the logic of accession conditionality and the need for institutional adaptation on both sides.
- Assess how the conflict has changed EU–Russia relations, the regional security architecture and the EU’s identity as a geopolitical union.

Key terms:

Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) – the first basic treaty between the EU and Ukraine, providing a general framework for political dialogue and cooperation.

European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) – the EU's framework for closer political and economic relations with neighbouring countries without an automatic promise of membership.

Eastern Partnership (EaP) – the eastern regional dimension of the ENP, covering Ukraine and five other partner countries, focused on deeper cooperation and reform.

Association Agreement (AA) – a far-reaching treaty between the EU and Ukraine that combines political association with economic integration and legal approximation.

DCFTA (Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area) – the trade part of the Association Agreement, giving Ukraine gradual access to parts of the EU internal market in exchange for regulatory alignment.

Accession conditionality – the set of political, economic and legal criteria that a candidate country must meet in order to join the EU.

Spheres-of-influence logic – a view that great powers have special rights and interests in neighbouring countries and can limit their foreign-policy choices.

Hybrid warfare / hybrid measures – a combination of military force, cyberattacks, disinformation, economic pressure and other tools used to weaken or destabilise another state.

Sanctions and restrictive measures – legal tools used by the EU to limit economic, financial or political ties with individuals, companies or states in response to violations of international law.

Macro-financial assistance (MFA) – EU financial support (usually loans and grants) that helps partner countries cover balance-of-payments needs and stabilise public finances.

Recovery and reconstruction – medium- and long-term processes of rebuilding infrastructure, institutions and the economy after a war, ideally linked with reforms and modernisation.

Strategic autonomy – the EU's ability to act independently in foreign and security policy, including in relations with major powers such as Russia.

11.1. Evolution of EU–Ukraine relations: from partnership to association and beyond

The evolution of EU–Ukraine relations can be seen as a move from loose partnership to deep association and, more recently, to a membership perspective. In the 1990s, relations were based mainly on the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, which entered into force in 1998 and created a general legal framework for political dialogue and sectoral cooperation, but without strong economic integration. With the launch of the European Neighbourhood Policy in 2004 and its eastern dimension, the Eastern Partnership in 2009, the EU offered Ukraine a closer relationship in return for reforms in areas such as rule of law, market economy and public administration. These frameworks already hinted at “European perspective”, but stopped short of promising membership. The real qualitative change came with the negotiation and signing of the EU–Ukraine Association Agreement, including a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA). The political chapters were signed in March 2014, and the full agreement entered into force on 1 September 2017, establishing a far-reaching regime of political association and economic integration through legal approximation and gradual integration into parts of the EU internal market.

Ukraine’s own self-positioning has been a key factor in this trajectory. For many years, Kyiv tried to follow a “multi-vector” strategy, balancing between closer ties with the EU and continued participation in post-Soviet integration projects led by Russia. The Orange Revolution of 2004–2005 and later the Euromaidan protests in 2013–2014 marked turning points: mass mobilisation in favour of signing the Association Agreement and of a “European choice” pushed Ukrainian elites to prioritise integration with the EU, even at high political and economic cost. The annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of war in eastern Ukraine in 2014 further accelerated this shift, turning the EU into a central partner for security, reforms and economic stabilisation. After the full-scale Russian invasion in 2022, Ukraine formally applied for EU membership and obtained candidate status in June 2022; accession negotiations were opened in 2024. In this sense, the relationship has moved “beyond association”: the Association Agreement and DCFTA now serve not only

as a framework for cooperation, but also as a roadmap for preparing Ukraine's eventual integration into the EU's legal, economic and political space.

11.2. Russian policies towards Ukraine and the EU: instruments, narratives, pressure

Russian policy towards Ukraine and the European Union is built on a classical spheres-of-influence logic, combined with modern security doctrines and a wide toolbox of pressure instruments. In Moscow's strategic view, Ukraine is part of a privileged "near abroad", where Western military and political presence should be limited, and where Russia claims special security interests. This approach is reflected in official documents that present NATO and EU enlargement as direct threats to Russian security and argue for a buffer zone between Russia and Euro-Atlantic structures. Economic and energy leverage form a central part of this policy: for many years Russia used gas pricing, supply cuts, debts and long-term contracts as tools to influence Ukraine and several EU member states, while also investing in pipeline projects that bypass Ukrainian territory and increase dependence on alternative routes under Russian control. Information strategies and influence operations complement these instruments. Russian state media, online campaigns and local proxy actors promote narratives that question Ukraine's statehood, portray the EU as divided and weak, and present Russia as a defender of traditional values and legitimate security interests; at the same time, they seek to deepen existing social and political cleavages inside EU societies.

Russian actions towards Ukraine – including the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the war in Donbas, the full-scale invasion launched in 2022 and the ongoing use of hybrid measures – have had profound consequences for EU security, cohesion and policy choices. The annexation and subsequent military operations directly challenged the European security order, forcing the EU to redefine Russia from a "strategic partner" to a major security threat and to adopt multiple rounds of sanctions targeting Russian elites, finance and energy exports. The full-scale war triggered an

unprecedented level of political unity among EU member states on support for Ukraine, including military assistance, macro-financial aid, temporary protection for millions of refugees and accelerated steps towards Ukraine's candidate status and opening of accession negotiations. At the same time, it exposed internal differences over threat perception, sanctions costs and the speed of phasing out Russian energy, creating tensions between states more dependent on Russian imports and those pushing for faster decoupling. Hybrid pressure – cyberattacks, disinformation, instrumentalisation of migrants, and suspected sabotage of infrastructure – has widened the EU agenda from traditional defence to resilience of critical infrastructure, cybersecurity and societal cohesion. Overall, Russian policies towards Ukraine and the EU have turned the Ukrainian question into a central test of EU solidarity, strategic autonomy and its ability to act as a geopolitical actor, pushing the Union to rethink enlargement, energy policy, defence cooperation and crisis management in a more hostile regional environment.

11.3. EU responses to the Ukraine–Russia conflict: support, sanctions, security and reconstruction

EU responses to the Ukraine–Russia conflict combine strong political backing for Ukraine, wide-ranging support measures and a dense regime of sanctions against Russia and associated actors. Politically, the EU has recognised Ukraine as a key partner whose security and sovereignty are directly linked to European stability. This is reflected in repeated European Council conclusions, high-level visits, and the decision to grant Ukraine candidate status and open accession negotiations. Economic and financial support includes large packages of macro-financial assistance, budget support and trade measures such as temporary suspension of tariffs and quotas for Ukrainian exports to the EU. In the security field, the Union uses mainly non-Article-5 instruments: through the European Peace Facility it finances the delivery of military equipment and ammunition by member states, while EU missions contribute to training Ukrainian armed forces and supporting reforms in the defence and security sector. Non-military support covers

cyber security, protection of critical infrastructure, demining, resilience against disinformation and strengthening of state institutions. In parallel, the EU has adopted multiple waves of sanctions and restrictive measures targeting Russian banks, companies, individuals, media outlets and specific sectors such as defence, high-tech goods and parts of the energy trade. These measures aim to limit Russia's ability to finance the war, restrict access to sensitive technologies and send a clear normative signal about the costs of aggression, while also addressing channels of circumvention through third countries.

The EU also plays a central role in humanitarian assistance, refugee reception and the early stages of planning for Ukraine's recovery and reconstruction. Through the EU Civil Protection Mechanism and humanitarian aid instruments, member states and EU agencies coordinate deliveries of medical supplies, shelter, food, equipment and emergency support to displaced persons inside Ukraine and to host communities in neighbouring countries. The activation of the Temporary Protection Directive has given millions of Ukrainian refugees immediate access to legal residence, labour markets, education and healthcare across the EU, turning short-term solidarity into a more structured reception framework. Macro-financial support helps the Ukrainian state to maintain basic functions, pay salaries and pensions, and stabilise public finances during the conflict. At the same time, the Union is working with Ukrainian authorities, international financial institutions and other partners on a long-term reconstruction agenda that links physical rebuilding with reforms and the green and digital transition. Plans for recovery stress principles such as transparency, rule of law, anti-corruption and alignment with EU standards, so that reconstruction serves not only to repair war damage but also to bring Ukraine closer to the institutional and economic conditions needed for future EU membership.

11.4. Future of EU–Ukraine relations and implications for the European order

The membership perspective has become the central frame for future EU–Ukraine relations. Ukraine’s candidate status and the opening of accession negotiations mean that the Association Agreement and DCFTA are now seen as a preparation phase for full membership, not as an end in themselves. Accession will depend on classic conditionality: the country must adopt and implement the EU *acquis* in areas such as the internal market, competition, environment, energy, justice and home affairs, as well as demonstrate progress on rule of law, judicial independence, anti-corruption and protection of fundamental rights. At the same time, the Union will need its own institutional adaptation. A large, war-damaged state with a strong agricultural sector and major reconstruction needs will affect the EU budget, cohesion policy and the Common Agricultural Policy, and will change the balance of power in the Council and the European Parliament. Debates on reform of decision-making, including a possible wider use of qualified majority voting in foreign and security policy, and on the future shape of the EU (for example, “widening and deepening” or differentiated integration) are therefore directly linked to the question of Ukraine’s accession. For both sides, the membership process is likely to be long and politically sensitive, but it sets a clear strategic direction and ties domestic reforms in Ukraine to a concrete institutional horizon.

In the longer term, the conflict and Ukraine’s European choice will also reshape EU–Russia relations, the regional security architecture and the Union’s self-image as a geopolitical actor. The idea of a “strategic partnership” between the EU and Russia has been replaced by a model of structured confrontation with limited, strictly defined areas of contact. Trust has been deeply damaged, and even if fighting stops, it is unlikely that relations will quickly return to the pre-2014 or pre-2022 pattern.

Security arrangements in Europe will be more focused on deterrence, defence and resilience, with a stronger role for NATO, increased defence spending by EU member states and closer coordination between the EU and the Alliance. The enlargement of the EU and NATO towards the East, including possible membership of

Ukraine and other neighbours, would move the political and legal borders of “Europe” further into the post-Soviet space and narrow the traditional Russian sphere of influence. For the EU, the way it manages support for Ukraine, sanctions on Russia, energy decoupling and reconstruction will be a test of its capacity to act as a geopolitical union, not only as a market and regulatory power. If the Union manages to stay united, to adapt its institutions and to link enlargement with deeper internal reforms, the outcome of the conflict may strengthen its identity as a security provider and a strategic actor in its neighbourhood. If internal divisions prevail, the risk is a more fragmented European order, with overlapping blocs, weaker norms and greater room for other powers to shape the region’s future.

Questions

1. What were the main stages in the evolution of EU–Ukraine relations from the PCA to the Association Agreement and DCFTA?
2. Why did the Association Agreement become a turning point in Ukraine’s “European choice”?
3. How did the Euromaidan protests change Ukraine’s self-positioning between different integration projects?
4. Which instruments does Russia use to influence Ukraine and the EU, and how do these instruments reflect a spheres-of-influence logic?
5. In what ways have Russian actions towards Ukraine (annexation, war, hybrid measures) forced the EU to reconsider its security and neighbourhood policies?
6. What types of support has the EU provided to Ukraine in political, economic and security terms since 2014 and especially after 2022?
7. How do EU sanctions and restrictive measures aim to affect Russia’s capacity to wage war and its broader behaviour?
8. Why is accession conditionality central for the future of EU–Ukraine relations, and which reforms are particularly sensitive or difficult?

9. How might Ukraine's future membership change internal EU politics, institutions and the Union's external posture?
10. In what sense is the management of the Ukraine–Russia conflict a test for the EU's identity as a geopolitical actor and for the future European security order?

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TOPIC 12: EU'S POLICIES TOWARDS THE SOUTH CAUCASUS

- 12.1. *The South Caucasus in the EU's strategic geography*
- 12.2. *Frameworks and instruments of EU–South Caucasus relations*
- 12.3. *Conflict-related engagement and resilience-building*
- 12.4. *Contemporary challenges and future directions of EU policy in the South Caucasus*

Overall goal

The overall goal of this topic is to help students understand how the South Caucasus fits into the EU's wider strategic geography: what makes Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia specific as partners; why the region matters for connectivity, energy and security; how EU bilateral and regional instruments work there; and how conflicts and external pressures shape the Union's options.

Expected learning results

After studying this topic, students should be able to:

- Describe the basic political, economic and security profile of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia and explain why the region is strategically important for the EU.
- Identify the main legal and policy frameworks of EU–South Caucasus relations (PCA, AA/DCFTA, CEPA and other formats) and their differences.
- Explain how the EU combines bilateral cooperation, regional initiatives and conflict-related engagement in its approach to the South Caucasus.
- Discuss the notion of resilience in this context, including governance, rule of law, economic diversification and societal links with the EU.
- Assess contemporary challenges and possible future directions of EU policy in the region, including connectivity, sectoral integration and security roles.

Key terms

South Caucasus – the region formed by Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, located between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea, at the crossroads of Europe, Russia, Türkiye, Iran and Central Asia.

Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) – the basic treaty framework used by the EU in the 1990s and 2000s to structure political dialogue and sectoral cooperation with partner countries, including in the South Caucasus.

Association Agreement (AA) / DCFTA – a far-reaching treaty between the EU and a partner country (for example, Georgia) that combines political association with deep trade and regulatory integration through a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area.

CEPA (Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement) – the main treaty between the EU and Armenia, which deepens cooperation and legal approximation in many sectors, while taking into account Armenia's membership in the Eurasian Economic Union.

Eastern Partnership (EaP) – the EU's eastern neighbourhood framework that includes the three South Caucasus countries and aims to support reforms, closer economic ties and people-to-people contacts.

Connectivity – physical and digital links (roads, railways, ports, pipelines, power lines, data cables) that connect the South Caucasus with the EU, the Black Sea, the Middle East and Central Asia.

Middle Corridor / Trans-Caspian route – an emerging multimodal transport corridor that connects Europe and Asia via the South Caucasus and the Caspian Sea, seen as an alternative or complement to routes via Russia.

Conflict-related engagement – the set of EU tools used around unresolved conflicts and disputed territories (diplomacy, monitoring, dialogue projects, support to communities) without providing hard security guarantees.

Resilience – the ability of states and societies to resist, adapt to and recover from shocks (conflicts, external pressure, hybrid threats) while maintaining core functions and development paths.

Global Gateway – the EU’s connectivity strategy that supports sustainable infrastructure and links with partner regions, including transport and digital projects involving the South Caucasus.

12.1. The South Caucasus in the EU’s strategic geography

The South Caucasus – Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia – forms a small but highly complex region located between the Black Sea, the Caspian Sea, Russia, Türkiye and Iran. Politically, the three states share a Soviet past but have followed different paths. Georgia presents itself as a reform-oriented, pro-Western state with strong public support for European integration, but it faces problems of polarised politics and periodic concerns about democratic backsliding. Armenia is a parliamentary republic that has pursued democratic reforms in recent years, while remaining heavily constrained by its security environment and economic dependence on external partners. Azerbaijan is a presidential system with strong centralised power and a political model often described as competitive or managed authoritarianism, combined with an assertive foreign and security policy. Economically, the region is marked by sharp asymmetries: Azerbaijan is a hydrocarbon exporter with significant oil and gas revenues; Armenia and Georgia are more diversified but structurally vulnerable, with smaller industrial bases, large service sectors, important remittances and a high sensitivity to regional trade and transport disruptions. In security terms, all three states have been affected by unresolved or only partially settled conflicts, militarisation and the presence or influence of larger powers, which makes the region one of the most fragile parts of the wider European neighbourhood.

For the European Union, the South Caucasus matters because it is both a corridor and a contact zone linking several strategic spaces. It is a land bridge between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea and a key segment of east–west transport and energy routes, including the Southern Gas Corridor that brings Caspian gas to European markets, and the so-called Middle Corridor that connects Europe with Central Asia and China via the South Caucasus

and the Caspian. The region is also close to the Middle East and is affected by developments there, especially in terms of security, migration and trade. At the same time, the South Caucasus is home to several “frozen” or recently reignited conflicts whose escalation could threaten critical pipelines, railways and digital links and create new refugee flows. For the EU, this combination of connectivity potential and conflict risk makes the region important for energy diversification, trade and transport resilience, but also for conflict prevention, crisis management and the promotion of stability at the intersection of different geopolitical spheres.

Within the EU’s broader Eastern track, the South Caucasus occupies a specific place. All three countries are part of the European Neighbourhood Policy and the Eastern Partnership, but their situations differ from those of other Eastern partners such as Ukraine or Moldova. Georgia has obtained EU candidate status, though its accession process is currently under strain; Armenia is deepening its ties with the EU and has started to explore a possible integration path without yet applying for membership; Azerbaijan remains a strategic energy and connectivity partner with a more selective and interest-driven engagement in EU rules and norms. Compared with other Eastern neighbours, the South Caucasus is more strongly defined by hard security issues, the presence of non-EU regional powers and its role as a transit and energy hub. This gives EU policy in the region a distinctive profile: it must combine the classic tools of the Eastern Partnership – support for reforms, approximation to EU standards, people-to-people contacts – with a sharper focus on connectivity, energy security and conflict management in a highly contested strategic environment.

12.2. Frameworks and instruments of EU–South Caucasus relations

EU relations with the South Caucasus are organised first of all through bilateral tracks, which differ for each of the three states. Georgia has the deepest legal framework: an Association Agreement with a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA), in force since 2016, plus visa-free travel for short stays in the

Schengen area. This creates a dense structure of political bodies, trade liberalisation and regulatory approximation to the EU acquis. Armenia, by contrast, is linked to the EU through the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA), signed in 2017 and fully in force since 2021. CEPA is less far-reaching than an Association Agreement with DCFTA, because Armenia is a member of the Eurasian Economic Union, but it still covers wide areas of political dialogue, sectoral cooperation and gradual legal alignment. Azerbaijan remains based on an older Partnership and Cooperation Agreement from the 1990s, complemented by sectoral arrangements and “partnership priorities”; negotiations on a modernised framework have been ongoing with a focus on energy, trade, connectivity and regulatory cooperation, but without the same level of legal integration as in the Georgian or Armenian cases.

These legal bases are filled with concrete instruments of political dialogue, reform support and technical assistance. Regular Association or Partnership Councils, Committees and subcommittees, as well as high-level visits and Eastern Partnership summits, provide fora in which the EU and each South Caucasus country review reforms, discuss regional security and set future priorities. On the operational side, the EU uses budget support, twinning projects, TAIEX missions, civil-society support and project grants to help modernise public administration, justice systems, trade-related institutions, and sectors such as energy, transport, environment and digital governance. Participation in selected EU programmes – for example Erasmus+, Horizon Europe, Creative Europe or digital and research initiatives – opens additional channels for people-to-people contacts, academic and business cooperation, and gradual inclusion in European networks and standards. In this way, the relationship is not limited to high politics, but also works “from below” through thousands of smaller projects that anchor EU practices in local institutions and societies.

Alongside bilateral tracks, the EU engages the South Caucasus through regional and sub-regional initiatives that focus on connectivity, infrastructure and common challenges. Within the Eastern Partnership, the region is included in plans to extend the

Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) to partner countries and to develop the “Middle Corridor” linking Europe with the Caspian region and Central Asia via the South Caucasus. Rail and road upgrades, ports on the Black Sea and the Caspian, and logistics hubs along east–west and north–south axes are supported through EU funding, the Global Gateway strategy and cooperation with international financial institutions. In parallel, the EU promotes digital connectivity (for example, secure data routes and regional data centres), environmental and climate projects (including support for the Green Agenda, energy efficiency and renewable energy), and cross-border initiatives in areas such as disaster risk management, water management and biodiversity. Taken together, these bilateral and regional frameworks make the South Caucasus an important test area for the EU’s ability to combine neighbourhood policy, connectivity strategy and conflict-sensitive engagement in a fragile but strategically located region.

12.3. Conflict-related engagement and resilience-building

The EU’s approach to unresolved conflicts and contested territories in the South Caucasus combines principled positions with a cautious, largely civilian toolbox. The Union does not recognise changes of borders by force and insists on respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity and internationally agreed formats of conflict settlement. At the same time, it usually avoids direct security guarantees and instead focuses on diplomatic engagement, support for mediating structures, and the use of its Special Representative for the region. Over time, this has produced a pattern of “conflict-related engagement” in which the EU seeks to be present on the ground, maintain channels of communication with all sides and use its economic and normative weight to discourage escalation, without taking over the role of existing negotiation formats.

Within this framework, confidence-building and practical cooperation across dividing lines are central instruments. The EU supports projects that bring together people from different communities, promote dialogue among local leaders, journalists, youth,

or professional groups, and improve everyday conditions in conflict-affected areas, for example through small socio-economic initiatives or community infrastructure. Programs under the EU4Dialogue umbrella are designed to work on both sides of conflict lines and to reach vulnerable groups, thereby building a minimum level of trust and reducing the sense of isolation. Civilian monitoring and presence on the ground, where politically possible, complement these efforts by observing the security situation, reporting on incidents, and serving as a contact point between local actors and international institutions. Such missions help to prevent misunderstandings, support de-escalation and provide impartial information to the EU and its partners.

Resilience-building provides a broader framework that connects conflict-related engagement with long-term governance and development agendas. The EU seeks to strengthen state and societal resilience by supporting better governance, rule of law, human rights protection and independent media, which are seen as foundations for peaceful conflict management. Economic diversification and connectivity projects aim to reduce structural vulnerabilities, create alternatives to conflict-related economies, and give local populations a stake in stable regional cooperation. At the same time, the Union invests in societal links with the EU through education, mobility, civil society partnerships and youth programmes, so that conflict-affected societies are not isolated from wider European networks. In the security field, growing attention is paid to hybrid and cyber threats, critical infrastructure protection, and crisis response capacities, reflecting the view that resilience is not only about institutions but also about the ability of societies to resist and recover from shocks.

12.4. Contemporary challenges and future directions of EU policy in the South Caucasus

EU policy in the South Caucasus is shaped by constant pressures from regional powers and by the presence of competing integration and security projects. Russia, Türkiye and Iran remain key hard-security and economic actors, while the United States, China

and the EU itself are increasingly active in trade, energy and connectivity. Each of these players promotes its own formats – from military alliances and security guarantees to customs unions, transport corridors and energy deals – which do not always fit together. For the EU, this means operating in an environment where partner countries try to hedge between different centres of power, and where progress in reforms or conflict management can be quickly affected by decisions taken in Moscow, Ankara, Tehran or other capitals. Competition over corridors such as the Middle Corridor and broader connectivity to Central Asia adds another layer, as infrastructure choices tend to lock in geopolitical orientations for decades.

A second challenge is how to balance differentiation among the three South Caucasus states with a coherent regional vision. Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan have different levels of ambition in their relations with the EU, different domestic political trajectories, and different security constraints. Recent debates on a more tailored Eastern Partnership approach explicitly call for separate tracks for “membership-aspirant” countries like Georgia and for other partners such as Armenia and Azerbaijan, which may prefer sectoral integration without a formal accession perspective. At the same time, many key problems – connectivity, energy transit, environmental risks, cross-border trade, and conflict dynamics – are regional by nature. If the EU differentiates too much, it risks losing the capacity to promote cooperative solutions across borders; if it pushes a single regional model, it may ignore domestic realities and push some partners away. Finding the right mix between bilateral depth and regional coherence will remain a central test for EU policy design.

Looking ahead, several possible scenarios for EU engagement can be outlined. One scenario focuses on deeper sectoral integration: gradual extension of selected parts of the EU internal market (for example in digital, energy or transport), stronger participation in EU programmes, and a dense web of regulatory and technical ties that bind the region closer to the Union even without full membership for all three states. A second scenario prioritises expanded connectivity, making the South Caucasus a core pillar of the EU’s

Global Gateway and Middle Corridor strategies, with major investments in transport, digital and energy infrastructure that link the region to both the Black Sea and Central Asia. A third scenario adds an enhanced security role, with more robust conflict-monitoring, mediation, security sector support and resilience-building against hybrid threats, reflecting growing expectations that the EU should act as a security provider, not only a donor. Finally, a more pessimistic scenario would see a more limited EU presence, if internal crises, enlargement fatigue, or external shocks reduce the Union's attention and resources. In practice, the future is likely to combine elements of these paths. The key question is whether the EU can turn its current economic weight and normative appeal into a more strategic, long-term engagement that helps the South Caucasus move from vulnerability and fragmentation toward greater stability, connectivity, and sustainable development.

Questions

1. What basic political and security features distinguish Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia from each other, and what do they have in common as a region?
2. Why does the South Caucasus occupy an important place in the EU's strategic geography, especially in terms of energy, trade and transport?
3. How do the legal frameworks of EU relations differ between Georgia (AA/DCFTA), Armenia (CEPA) and Azerbaijan (PCA and sectoral arrangements)?
4. In what ways do EU political dialogue and technical assistance contribute to reforms and institution-building in the South Caucasus?
5. How do regional and sub-regional initiatives on connectivity (for example, TEN-T extension, Middle Corridor, digital links) complement bilateral cooperation?
6. What are the main principles of the EU's approach to unresolved conflicts and contested territories in the South Caucasus?

7. How can confidence-building and dialogue projects support stability in conflict-affected societies, even without a final political settlement?
8. What does “resilience” mean in the context of the South Caucasus, and which EU instruments are used to strengthen it?
9. How do pressures from other regional powers and competing integration projects complicate EU policy in the South Caucasus?
10. Which future scenario for EU engagement in the region do you consider more likely: deeper sectoral integration, connectivity-focused engagement, a stronger security role, or a more limited presence – and why?

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TOPIC 13: EU-MOLDOVA RELATIONS

- 13.1. *Moldova in the EU's Eastern neighbourhood*
- 13.2. *Evolution of EU–Moldova relations: from cooperation to association and candidate status*
- 13.3. *Policy frameworks, support instruments and sectoral cooperation*
- 13.4. *Resilience, conflict dimension and security context*
- 13.5. *Future of EU–Moldova relations and implications for the region*

Overall goal

The overall goal of this topic is to help students understand how EU–Moldova relations have developed from basic cooperation to association and candidate status, how these relations work in practice through policies and instruments, and what Moldova's EU path means for resilience, security and the wider Eastern neighbourhood.

Expected learning results

After studying this topic, students should be able to:

- Describe Moldova's main political, economic and security characteristics in the context of the EU's Eastern neighbourhood.
- Outline the key stages in the evolution of EU–Moldova relations, from the PCA to the Association Agreement/DCFTA and candidate status.
- Explain the main policy frameworks and instruments the EU uses to support reforms and sectoral cooperation in Moldova.
- Discuss how the EU addresses resilience, conflict-related issues and security challenges, including energy and hybrid threats.
- Assess the opportunities and risks linked to Moldova's EU membership perspective and its implications for the wider region.

Key terms

Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) – the early basic treaty between the EU and Moldova that created a general framework for political and economic cooperation.

Association Agreement (AA) – a far-reaching treaty that links Moldova more closely to the EU through political association, economic integration and legal approximation.

Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) – the trade part of the Association Agreement; it opens much of the EU market for Moldovan goods and requires Moldova to align many trade-related rules to EU standards.

Visa liberalization – the EU decision that allows Moldovan citizens with biometric passports to travel for short stays to Schengen countries without a visa.

Macro-financial assistance (MFA) – EU loans and grants that help Moldova cover balance-of-payments needs and support economic reforms.

Candidate status – formal recognition by the EU that Moldova is a potential future member, provided that it fulfils accession conditions.

Transnistrian conflict – the unresolved situation of the Transnistrian region on Moldova's eastern border, which declared independence but is not internationally recognised.

Resilience – the ability of Moldova's state and society to resist, adapt to and recover from shocks such as conflicts, energy crises or hybrid threats.

Hybrid threats – combined use of tools like disinformation, cyberattacks, economic pressure and political interference to destabilise a country.

Reform and Growth Facility for Moldova – a recent EU financial support plan that links large-scale assistance with reforms and EU integration goals.

13.1. Moldova in the EU's Eastern neighbourhood

Moldova is a small parliamentary republic between Romania (an EU member state) and Ukraine. It has a population of around 2.5–3 million and a large diaspora living and working in EU countries and Russia. The economy is open but fragile: it depends strongly on agriculture and food processing, remittances from migrants and trade with the EU, which has become Moldova's main trading partner. At the same time, it faces structural problems such as low productivity, regional inequalities and high levels of poverty in rural areas. Politically, Moldova has experienced frequent government changes and strong competition between pro-European and pro-Russian forces, which has made reforms sometimes slow and inconsistent.

Moldova's security context is shaped by several vulnerabilities. The unresolved Transnistrian issue means that the country has a de facto separated territory on its eastern border, with the presence of foreign troops and a special economic and political regime. Historically, Moldova was highly dependent on Russian gas and on electricity from power plants in or near this region, which increased its exposure to energy crises. The war in neighbouring Ukraine has added new pressures, including transit risks, refugee flows and hybrid threats such as disinformation and cyberattacks. For the EU, Moldova is important as part of the Eastern Partnership, as a neighbour of both Romania and Ukraine, and as a test case for whether a small, vulnerable state can successfully follow a pro-European reform and integration path under difficult conditions.

13.2. Evolution of EU–Moldova relations: from cooperation to association and candidate status

EU–Moldova relations started with a classic cooperation model and later moved towards deep association and, most recently, a membership perspective. In the 1990s, the legal basis was the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA), which created a general framework for political dialogue, trade and sectoral cooperation but did not offer strong economic integration. With the launch

of the European Neighbourhood Policy and the Eastern Partnership, Moldova received an Action Plan with reform priorities and became one of the “front-runners” among eastern partners, especially after 2009. Visa liberalisation for short stays in the Schengen area, granted in 2014, was an important symbolic and practical step, showing trust in Moldova’s ability to manage borders and migration.

The key change came with the EU–Moldova Association Agreement, including a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA), signed in 2014 and in full force since July 2016. This agreement goes far beyond classic free trade: it requires Moldova to approximate its laws, standards and procedures to large parts of the EU *acquis* and gradually integrate into parts of the internal market. Since 2022, the relationship has moved “beyond association”. After Moldova applied for EU membership in March 2022, the European Council granted it candidate status on 23 June 2022, and accession negotiations were officially opened in June 2024. This means that the Association Agreement and DCFTA now serve as a roadmap for accession preparations, linking domestic reforms directly to a membership horizon.

13.3. Policy frameworks, support instruments and sectoral cooperation

Today, EU–Moldova relations are organised around a dense institutional architecture. The Association Council, Association Committee and numerous subcommittees meet regularly to review progress, discuss reforms and set priorities in areas such as trade, energy, justice, transport and environment. Parliamentary cooperation and political dialogue at the level of presidents, prime ministers and foreign ministers complement these structures and create space to address strategic issues, including security and enlargement.

The EU supports Moldova through a wide mix of financial and technical instruments. These include budget support linked to reform conditions, Twinning projects that connect Moldovan public institutions with those of EU member states, and TAIEX short-

term expert missions. Moldova has also been one of the largest per-capita recipients of macro-financial assistance (MFA) from the EU, especially since 2022, when energy and security shocks hit the economy. In parallel, civil society, independent media and local authorities receive targeted support to strengthen accountability and citizen participation. Key sectoral priorities are justice and rule of law (including anti-corruption and judicial reform), public administration modernisation, energy security and diversification away from Russian sources, connectivity and transport, digital transformation, and implementation of the green agenda in line with EU climate and environment policies.

13.4. Resilience, conflict dimension and security context

Conflict and security questions are a central part of EU–Moldova relations, even if the Union does not provide classic military guarantees. The EU supports a peaceful settlement of the Transnistrian issue based on Moldova’s sovereignty and territorial integrity and participates in existing negotiation formats. It funds confidence-building measures that improve contacts and practical cooperation across the Dniester/Nistru River, for example through joint projects in trade, community development, infrastructure and people-to-people exchanges. These activities seek to reduce tensions, keep communication channels open and make future reintegration more realistic.

In recent years, resilience-building has become a main theme. The EU assists Moldova in strengthening rule of law, fighting corruption, improving public administration and protecting human rights, on the assumption that better governance makes the country less vulnerable to internal and external shocks. At the same time, special attention is given to hybrid threats, disinformation and cyber security. New EU-supported missions and initiatives help Moldovan authorities develop strategic communication, build cyber-defence capacities and protect critical infrastructure. Energy resilience is another priority: the EU has backed emergency measures and a medium-term energy strategy to reduce dependence on Russian

gas and electricity, connect Moldova more strongly to EU networks and support vulnerable consumers. Together, these steps illustrate a broad understanding of security, where institutions, economy and society must all be able to absorb and recover from crises.

13.5. Future of EU–Moldova relations and implications for the region

Looking ahead, the membership perspective defines the strategic direction of EU–Moldova relations. Accession conditionality will require Moldova to continue and deepen reforms in justice, public administration, competition policy, environment, agriculture, digital and many other sectors. This process will be demanding: it needs stable political commitment, administrative capacity and broad social support. At the same time, the EU itself must be ready to absorb a new member state with modest economic size but significant reform and security needs, which will affect the Union's budget, cohesion policy and decision-making structures. Debates about reform of EU institutions, voting rules and the future of enlargement are therefore directly linked to Moldova's path.

The future also depends on how Moldova manages internal and external pressures. Internally, there is a risk of reform fatigue, political polarisation and social frustration if living standards do not improve quickly enough. Externally, Moldova continues to face Russian interference, disinformation and economic pressure, as well as spillovers from the war in Ukraine. In this context, EU support is both an opportunity and a test: if the Union remains engaged, helps deliver visible improvements and stands firmly behind Moldova's sovereignty and European choice, the country can become a positive example of successful transformation in the Eastern neighbourhood. If support is inconsistent or internal divisions in the EU grow, the process may slow down, creating space for alternative influences. For the wider region, Moldova's trajectory will send a strong signal about the credibility of the EU's Eastern policy, its role as a geopolitical actor and the future balance between enlargement, resilience-building and security in the EU's eastern neighbourhood.

Questions

1. Why is Moldova considered a strategically important small state in the EU's Eastern neighbourhood?
2. What were the main steps in the evolution of EU–Moldova relations from the PCA to the Association Agreement and DCFTA?
3. How has the Association Agreement changed Moldova's obligations and opportunities compared with the earlier cooperation framework?
4. What does candidate status mean in practical terms for Moldova's domestic reforms and for the EU?
5. Which EU institutions and bodies manage the day-to-day implementation of the Association Agreement with Moldova?
6. How do EU financial and technical instruments (budget support, Twinning, TAIEX, MFA) help Moldova implement reforms?
7. Why is energy security such a central element in EU–Moldova cooperation today?
8. In what ways does the Transnistrian issue influence Moldova's security and its relations with the EU?
9. How does the EU support Moldova's resilience against hybrid threats, disinformation and cyberattacks?
10. What are the main political and social risks that could slow down Moldova's EU integration process?
11. How might Moldova's accession, if successful, affect the EU's budget, institutions and decision-making?
12. In what sense can Moldova be seen as a “test case” for the EU's Eastern policy and its role as a geopolitical actor?

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TOPIC 14: EU-BELARUS RELATIONS

- 14.1. *Belarus in the EU's Eastern neighbourhood*
- 14.2. *Evolution of EU–Belarus relations: from limited engagement to deep crisis*
- 14.3. *Policy frameworks, restrictive measures and selective engagement*
- 14.4. *Security, hybrid threats and regional implications*
- 14.5. *Future of EU–Belarus relations and scenarios for the European neighbourhood*

Overall goal

The overall goal of this topic is to help students understand how EU–Belarus relations have moved from cautious, limited engagement to a deep political crisis, how EU policy combines sanctions and support for society, and what Belarus's internal trajectory means for regional security, the EU's Eastern neighbourhood and the Union's role as a geopolitical and normative actor.

Expected learning results

After studying this topic, students should be able to:

- Describe the main political, economic and security characteristics of Belarus in the EU's Eastern neighbourhood.
- Explain the key stages in the evolution of EU–Belarus relations, including cycles of sanctions, partial dialogue and the break after 2020.
- Identify the main EU instruments used towards Belarus today: sanctions, suspension of official cooperation, and expanded support to civil society and independent media.
- Discuss Belarus's role in regional security, especially its military integration with Russia and involvement in the war against Ukraine.
- Assess different future scenarios for EU–Belarus relations and their implications for the wider European order and the EU's Eastern policy.

Key terms

Authoritarian regime – a political system where power is concentrated in one leader or a small group, elections are not free or fair, and opposition and media are strongly controlled.

Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) – an early type of treaty between the EU and partner countries that sets a general framework for political and economic cooperation but does not include deep integration.

Eastern Partnership (EaP) – the EU's eastern neighbourhood framework that originally included Belarus and aimed to support reforms, closer economic ties and people-to-people contacts.

Sanctions / restrictive measures – legal tools used by the EU to limit travel, freeze assets or restrict trade and financial links with certain individuals, companies or sectors, in response to serious violations of international norms.

Sectoral sanctions – sanctions that target whole sectors of the economy, for example potash, oil products, finance or aviation, rather than only individuals.

Hybrid threats – combined use of different pressure tools, such as instrumentalisation of migration, disinformation, cyber-attacks and economic coercion, to weaken another state without open war.

Instrumentalisation of migration – deliberate use of migrants and asylum seekers by a state to put political or security pressure on another state or the EU.

Union State (Russia–Belarus) – a framework of deep political, economic and military integration agreed by Russia and Belarus, which gives Moscow strong influence over Belarusian policy.

Belarusian democratic forces in exile – opposition leaders, activists, journalists and other Belarusians who left the country after repression and now work from abroad for democratic change.

Strategic autonomy (in this context) – the EU's ability to define and implement its own policy towards Belarus and the region, balancing values and security interests without simply following other powers.

14.1. Belarus in the EU's Eastern neighbourhood

Belarus is a medium-sized country in Eastern Europe, bordering three EU member states (Poland, Lithuania, Latvia) and also Ukraine and Russia. Politically, it is an authoritarian presidential system centred on Alexander Lukashenko, who has been in power since 1994. Elections are not considered free or fair, opposition parties are severely restricted, and there are many political prisoners. Independent media and civil society organisations face strong pressure, censorship and legal obstacles, so the political and public space is very limited.

The economy is still largely state-controlled, with big state-owned enterprises in industry, energy and transport. Belarus has inherited a relatively developed industrial base and an important position in transit, including pipelines, railways and roads linking Russia to the EU. At the same time, it is highly dependent on Russia for cheap energy, markets and financial support. Russia is Belarus's main trade partner and strategic ally, and the two countries are formally linked through the "Union State" and participation in Russian-led security and economic organisations.

From a security point of view, Belarus is important for the EU because of its geographic position and its close military integration with Russia. Since 2022, Belarus has allowed Russian forces to use its territory, airspace and infrastructure for the war against Ukraine, including the initial attack towards Kyiv and continuing missile and drone strikes. Russian troops and equipment are stationed in Belarus, and plans have been announced to deploy Russian tactical nuclear weapons there. For the EU and NATO, this turns Belarus into both a source of threats and a key part of the regional military balance on the eastern flank.

14.2. Evolution of EU–Belarus relations: from limited engagement to deep crisis

EU–Belarus relations have never reached the depth of cooperation seen with other Eastern neighbours. A Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) was signed in 1995, but it was never ratified by the EU because of concerns over democracy and human

rights in Belarus. Still, Belarus was formally included in the European Neighbourhood Policy and later in the Eastern Partnership, with an approach described as “critical engagement”: the EU tried to keep some channels open while using political dialogue and limited sanctions to react to election fraud and repression.

From the mid-2000s to the mid-2010s, relations went through several cycles. After particularly harsh crackdowns, the EU introduced targeted sanctions on officials and some economic actors; during slightly calmer periods, some sanctions were suspended and technical cooperation was resumed in selected areas. A partial thaw came around 2015, when most sanctions were lifted and there was modest dialogue on issues like migration and regional security. However, the basic political problems inside Belarus were never resolved.

The turning point was the 2020 presidential election, widely considered fraudulent. Mass protests were met with extreme violence, thousands of people were arrested, and many opposition figures, including Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, were forced into exile. The regime then used migrants to put pressure on EU borders in 2021 and, from 2022, actively supported Russia’s war against Ukraine by providing territory and infrastructure. In response, the EU fundamentally changed its policy: it stopped almost all official cooperation with Belarusian state authorities, imposed broad individual and sectoral sanctions, and shifted its support directly to Belarusian society and democratic forces.

14.3. Policy frameworks, restrictive measures and selective engagement

Current EU policy towards Belarus is based on strong restrictive measures and only very selective engagement with state structures. Since 2020, the EU has adopted multiple rounds of sanctions against Belarusian officials, judges, security services, propagandists and businesspeople linked to the regime. Sectoral sanctions target key export areas such as potash and petroleum products, as well as aviation, financial services and certain technologies. In addition, there are restrictions linked to Belarus’s role in Russia’s

war, including measures on trade and transport. These sanctions are regularly renewed and adjusted.

Formal political dialogues at high level have been largely suspended or downgraded. Belarus itself announced the suspension of its participation in the Eastern Partnership in 2021. However, the EU keeps minimum technical contacts where this is necessary to manage shared risks, for example border management with neighbouring member states, nuclear safety related to the Astravets nuclear plant, and certain environmental and public-health issues that cannot be addressed without some cooperation with Belarusian authorities.

At the same time, the EU has significantly expanded its support for Belarusian civil society, independent media, human-rights defenders, students and academic communities, both inside the country and in exile. Assistance includes financial aid to NGOs, training, scholarships, support for journalists and media in exile, and programmes that help political prisoners and their families. EU documents stress that this support is for the Belarusian people, not the regime, and that the long-term goal is a free, democratic, sovereign Belarus.

14.4. Security, hybrid threats and regional implications

Belarus has become a key security actor in the region because of its deep military integration with Russia and its role in the war against Ukraine. Russian troops have used Belarusian territory as a staging ground for attacks, and Belarusian infrastructure is part of Russia's military logistics system. Plans to station Russian tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus further increase concerns about escalation and the security of neighbouring EU states. This situation affects NATO planning on the eastern flank, especially around the Suwałki corridor between Poland and Lithuania, which lies between Belarus and the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad.

The regime in Minsk has also used hybrid tools against the EU. In 2021, Belarusian authorities facilitated the arrival and movement of migrants from the Middle East and other regions to the borders

with Poland, Lithuania and Latvia, in what the EU described as “instrumentalisation of migration” for political purposes. Disinformation campaigns, hostile media narratives and cyber threats also form part of the broader pressure on neighbouring countries and on the EU as a whole.

These developments have wider implications for the regional security architecture. The absence of meaningful dialogue with the Belarusian authorities, their close alignment with Moscow and the use of Belarusian territory for military operations undermine traditional arms-control and confidence-building arrangements in Europe. At the same time, the close connection between Belarus and Russia makes it difficult for the EU to design separate security policies for each; decisions about sanctions, deterrence, support to Ukraine and military posture must consider Belarus as an integral part of the wider Russia–Ukraine–NATO puzzle.

14.5. Future of EU–Belarus relations and scenarios for the European neighbourhood

Looking ahead, EU–Belarus relations are marked by uncertainty and strong contrasts between the regime and society. One scenario is continued authoritarian consolidation and deeper subordination to Russia. In this case, Belarus would remain heavily sanctioned and isolated from European structures, while its territory would be used to project Russian power. EU policy would focus on containment, resilience of neighbouring EU states and continued support to Belarusians in exile and inside the country, without expecting quick change.

Another scenario, which EU institutions and many Belarusians hope for, is gradual or sudden political change leading to democratic transformation. In that case, the EU could activate a broad “European offer” for democratic Belarus: economic support, market access, visa facilitation, and deeper political and sectoral integration, similar to what has been proposed for other Eastern partners. Strategic documents already discuss how to coordinate donors, design a long-term reform agenda and avoid repeating past mistakes in supporting transitions.

In reality, the future may lie somewhere between these extremes, with phases of strong repression and partial openings, internal splits within the elite, and continuing external pressure from Russia. For the EU, Belarus is a test of how to combine normative goals (democracy, human rights, rule of law) with the hard realities of security and geopolitics. The way the Union manages sanctions, support to democratic forces, and coordination with partners like the US and the UK will shape not only Belarus's European future, but also the credibility of the EU's Eastern policy and its self-image as a geopolitical actor.

Questions

1. Why is Belarus important for the EU's security and neighbourhood policy, despite the very problematic political situation inside the country?
2. How did EU–Belarus relations evolve from the 1990s until the 2020 presidential election? Which moments were the main turning points?
3. What were the main reasons for the EU to refuse ratification of the PCA and later to introduce strong sanctions against Belarus?
4. How did the 2020 elections, the mass protests and the repression that followed change the EU's approach to Belarus?
5. In what ways has Belarus supported Russia's war against Ukraine, and how has this influenced EU and NATO security thinking?
6. What types of sanctions has the EU adopted against Belarus since 2020, and which sectors or actors do they target?
7. Why has the EU shifted its assistance away from Belarusian state authorities and towards civil society, independent media and people in exile?
8. What is meant by “instrumentalisation of migration” in the EU–Belarus context, and why is it considered a hybrid threat?
9. How do Russian–Belarusian military and nuclear plans affect the security of neighbouring EU member states?
10. What policy options does the EU have if authoritarian rule in Belarus continues for a long time?

11. What could a “European offer” for a future democratic Belarus include, and how might it differ from the current policy?
12. In what sense are EU–Belarus relations a test of the EU’s credibility as both a normative power and a geopolitical actor?

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PART III: EU-SOUTH. THE EU AND SECURITY IN THE SOUTHERN NEIGHBOURHOOD

TOPIC 15: SECURITY DYNAMICS OF THE SOUTHERN NEIGHBOURHOOD

- 15.1. *Mapping the Southern Neighbourhood*
- 15.2. *Key security challenges and risks*
- 15.3. *Regional orders and external actors*
- 15.4. *The EU's strategic approach to the Southern Neighbourhood*

Overall goal

The overall goal of this topic is to help students understand the Southern Neighbourhood as a key strategic region for the European Union, to analyse its main security challenges and regional dynamics, and to explain how the EU builds and adjusts its policies towards this complex environment.

Expected learning results

After studying this topic, students should be able to:

- Explain how the EU's Southern Neighbourhood is defined in geographical and political terms and identify the main types of states and regimes in the region;
- Describe the key socio-economic features of the Southern Neighbourhood, including demographic trends, youth bulge, unemployment and inequalities, and discuss how these factors shape security and migration;
- Analyse the main security risks in the region, such as state fragility, armed conflicts, forced displacement, terrorism, organised crime and other transnational threats, and show how they affect the EU;
- Identify the most important regional and global actors involved in the Southern Neighbourhood, explain their interests and rivalries, and assess how overlapping regional organisations influence the regional order; and

- Evaluate the evolution of the EU's strategic approach to the South, including the European Neighbourhood Policy, the Union for the Mediterranean and the EU Global Strategy, with special attention to the tensions between stability, security, democracy and human rights and to current debates on EU strategic autonomy and comprehensive security.

Key terms

Southern Neighbourhood – the group of countries in North Africa and the Middle East that are linked to the EU through geography, history, trade and the European Neighbourhood Policy.

State fragility – a situation where state institutions are too weak to provide basic services, security and rule of law to the population in a stable and predictable way.

Youth bulge – a demographic situation where a very large share of the population is young (usually under 25–30 years old), creating both opportunities and strong pressure on education, jobs and housing.

Forced displacement and refugee movements – the movement of people who must leave their homes or countries because of war, persecution or serious human rights violations and who seek protection elsewhere.

Transnational threats – security problems that cross borders and cannot be solved by one state alone, such as terrorism, organised crime, trafficking, and energy or maritime insecurity.

Regional powers – influential states in the wider Middle East and North Africa, such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Türkiye, Iran or Israel, that shape politics and security beyond their own borders.

Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) – a multilateral platform that brings together EU member states and Southern and Eastern Mediterranean countries to promote regional dialogue and concrete cooperation projects.

Strategic autonomy – the EU's ambition to be able to act more independently in foreign and security policy by using its own political, military and economic capacities, especially in its neighbourhood.

Comprehensive security – an approach that connects traditional military security with economic, social, environmental and human security, and combines different EU instruments in an integrated way.

15.1. Mapping the Southern Neighbourhood

The Southern Neighbourhood of the European Union usually refers to the group of countries in North Africa and the Middle East that are directly connected to the EU through the Mediterranean Sea and through EU neighbourhood policies. This space includes, in particular, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya and Egypt in North Africa, as well as countries on the eastern Mediterranean such as Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Israel and the Palestinian territories. In some EU documents and debates, this geographical notion also extends, at least functionally, towards parts of the Gulf region when questions of energy, security or migration are discussed. What unites these states from the EU perspective is not only their location “across the sea”, but also their strong links with Europe in terms of trade, energy flows, migration, historical ties and security interdependence. At the same time, the region is internally very diverse in terms of size, natural resources, level of development and political systems, which makes the Southern Neighbourhood a complex and heterogeneous strategic environment for EU action.

Within this geographical space, we can identify several main types of states and political regimes. First, there are constitutional or traditional monarchies, such as Morocco and Jordan, where a king plays a central role in the political system and often holds important executive and religious authority. Second, there are republican regimes, for example in Egypt or, before the civil war, in Syria, usually built around a strong presidency, powerful security institutions and ruling parties or elites. In many cases, these republics have limited political pluralism and only partially competitive elections, so they are often described as “authoritarian” or “hybrid” regimes rather than fully consolidated democracies. Third, some countries in the Southern Neighbourhood can be described as fragile or conflict-affected states, such as Libya and Syria in the last decade. In these cases, the central government does not fully

control the national territory, state institutions are weak or fragmented, and non-state armed groups play a major role in politics and security. Across all these regime types, formal constitutional rules often coexist with informal networks of power, patronage systems and a significant role of security services, which influences how reforms are designed and how external partners, including the EU, can operate.

The socio-economic background of the Southern Neighbourhood is another key element for understanding the region and its relationship with the European Union. Most countries face rapid population growth and a pronounced “youth bulge”, meaning that a very large share of the population is under 30 years old. This young population is a potential source of dynamism, innovation and growth, but it also creates strong pressure on education systems, labour markets, housing and public services. Structural unemployment, and especially youth unemployment, is high in many states, and even educated young people often struggle to find stable and well-paid jobs. As a result, informal employment, temporary work and migration (both within the region and towards Europe or the Gulf) become important survival and mobility strategies for many families. At the same time, deep inequalities exist between rich and poor, between urban centres and rural or peripheral areas, and between different social groups, including gender gaps in labour market participation and access to resources. These socio-economic imbalances interact with political grievances and feelings of exclusion, and they have been visible in episodes of social protest and instability, from the Arab uprisings of 2010–2011 to more recent demonstrations. For the EU, these demographic and economic trends are central to thinking about security, development cooperation, migration management and long-term stability in its Southern Neighbourhood.

15.2. Key security challenges and risks

The security environment in the EU’s Southern Neighbourhood is shaped by a combination of internal weaknesses and cross-border dynamics. One central problem is state fragility, which means that public institutions are often too weak to provide basic ser-

vices, guarantee security or implement policies in an effective and predictable way. In several countries, administrative capacity is limited, corruption is widespread, and the justice system does not function independently. These governance problems lead to rule-of-law deficits: citizens do not always trust the courts or the police, and legal norms are not applied equally to all. As a result, people often rely on informal networks, local power brokers or even armed groups instead of the state. For the European Union, this fragility makes cooperation more difficult, because agreements made at the central level are not always implemented on the ground and reforms can easily be blocked by vested interests.

A second group of security challenges is linked to armed conflicts, civil wars and their regional spillovers. In recent decades, parts of the Southern Neighbourhood have experienced large-scale violence, state collapse and complex civil wars, as seen for example in Syria or Libya. These conflicts rarely stay within one country's borders. They create flows of weapons, fighters and illicit goods across frontiers and can destabilise neighbouring states that are already fragile. Refugees and internally displaced persons need protection and resources; at the same time, the presence of armed non-state actors, militias and foreign military interventions introduces additional layers of risk. Borders become more difficult to control, and traditional diplomatic tools are less effective when there is no single legitimate authority to negotiate with. This situation increases uncertainty for the EU, which must manage both direct security threats and the indirect effects of instability very close to its own territory.

Migration, forced displacement and refugee movements form another key dimension of security and human security in the Southern Neighbourhood. Conflicts, repression, lack of economic opportunities and environmental stress push many people to leave their homes, either moving within their own country, crossing into neighbouring states or trying to reach Europe. The region hosts large numbers of refugees and migrants, which puts pressure on local communities, public services and labour markets. At the same time, irregular migration routes across the Mediterranean, through the Sahara Desert or via the Eastern Mediterranean are dangerous

and often controlled by smugglers and criminal networks. For the EU, these movements raise humanitarian and political questions: how to protect people in need, how to support host countries in the region, and how to manage irregular arrivals at its own borders while respecting international and European law. Migration thus becomes both a shared challenge and a sensitive issue in EU–Southern Neighbourhood relations.

Finally, the Southern Neighbourhood is affected by a series of transnational threats that cross borders and link security in the region with security inside the European Union. Terrorism remains a concern, with extremist organisations recruiting, financing and planning attacks through networks that may operate across several countries. Organised crime and trafficking – including drugs, weapons, people and illicit goods – use weak border controls and corrupt officials to expand their activities. These criminal economies often finance armed groups and undermine state authority. Energy and maritime security are also crucial: the region is an important source and transit corridor for oil and gas, and key shipping lanes in the Mediterranean and adjacent seas are essential for global trade. Disruptions caused by conflict, piracy, blockades or sabotage can therefore have immediate economic and security consequences for both the Southern Neighbourhood and the EU. Taken together, these factors create a complex web of risks, where domestic instability and regional tensions interact with global security challenges and require a coordinated response.

15.3. Regional orders and external actors

The Southern Neighbourhood is not only a space of relations between the European Union and its southern partners, but also a crowded arena where many regional powers pursue their own interests and compete for influence. Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates are important actors because of their financial resources, media networks and religious-soft power. They support different political and religious groups, invest in infrastructure and energy projects, and sometimes take military action, as in Yemen or Libya. Türkiye has also

become a key regional player, combining its NATO membership and EU candidate status with an active military and diplomatic presence in Syria, Libya and the Eastern Mediterranean. Iran projects influence through allied groups and networks in Syria, Lebanon and elsewhere, while Israel is a central security actor in the Levant, with advanced military capabilities and specific security concerns connected to its conflict environment. Rivalries and shifting coalitions among these regional powers shape local conflicts, peace processes and economic relations, and they can either reinforce or undermine EU policies in the region.

Alongside regional powers, several global actors are deeply engaged in the Southern Neighbourhood. The United States has traditionally been a major security and diplomatic actor, particularly in relation to the Arab–Israeli conflict, energy security and counterterrorism. Russia has re-emerged as an important military and political actor, especially through its intervention in the Syrian war and its growing arms sales and energy cooperation with several countries in the region. China is increasingly present as an economic partner, focusing on infrastructure, trade and investment within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative; it usually avoids direct involvement in local conflicts but gains influence through long-term economic ties. Other actors, such as the United Kingdom, individual EU member states, and international financial institutions, also play non-negligible roles. For the European Union, this dense presence of global powers creates both opportunities for cooperation and risks of competition, as external agendas are not always compatible with EU goals of stability, human rights and multilateral governance.

The regional order of the Southern Neighbourhood is further complicated by a variety of overlapping organisations, alliances and cooperation frameworks. Traditional structures such as the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) provide forums for consultation and, in some cases, joint action among Arab and Gulf states, though internal divisions often limit their effectiveness. The African Union links North African states with sub-Saharan Africa and develops its own approaches to peace and security on the continent. In addition, there are sub-regional and

cross-regional initiatives like the Union for the Mediterranean, the 5+5 Dialogue in the Western Mediterranean, and various ad hoc coalitions for specific conflicts or issues. These multiple and sometimes competing frameworks create a complex institutional landscape, in which mandates overlap and coordination is often weak. For the EU, understanding how these structures interact, and identifying where they can be partners or obstacles, is essential for designing coherent policies towards the Southern Neighbourhood and for promoting a more stable and rules-based regional order.

15.4. The EU's strategic approach to the Southern Neighbourhood

The European Union's strategic approach to the Southern Neighbourhood has developed through several key policy frameworks and narratives. The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), launched in the early 2000s, aims to create a "ring of friends" around the EU by offering partner countries closer political association and economic integration in exchange for reforms. In the South, ENP action plans and partnership priorities set out goals in areas such as governance, economic development, mobility and security. In parallel, the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), established in 2008, provides a multilateral framework that brings together EU member states and Southern partners for dialogue and for concrete regional projects, for example in infrastructure, environment, education and youth. Later, the EU Global Strategy, presented in 2016, reframed the Mediterranean and the Southern Neighbourhood within a broader vision of "principled pragmatism", resilience and integrated security, underlining that the stability and prosperity of neighbouring regions are directly linked to the security of EU citizens. Together, these frameworks form the main reference points for EU policy, even if their implementation has often been uneven and adapted to changing regional realities.

At the heart of the EU's approach lies a constant tension between different policy objectives: stability and security on the one hand, and democracy, human rights and the rule of law on the other. Officially, the EU promotes values such as political pluralism, fun-

damental freedoms and accountable institutions, and it links financial assistance and closer market access to progress in these areas. In practice, however, the Union has sometimes prioritised cooperation with authoritarian or semi-authoritarian governments when this seemed necessary for short-term stability, counter-terrorism, migration control or energy supplies. This has created a “stability versus democracy” dilemma: supporting existing regimes may reduce immediate risks of chaos or conflict, but it can also reinforce patterns of repression and exclusion that later generate protests, radicalisation and new waves of instability. Critics argue that the EU has not always applied its conditionality consistently and that it has sometimes accepted “façade reforms” in exchange for cooperation on security and migration. As a result, the credibility of EU normative power in the Southern Neighbourhood has been questioned, and local actors may perceive a gap between European rhetoric and actual practice.

Debates on “strategic autonomy” and comprehensive security inside the EU have given a new dimension to the Southern Neighbourhood in recent years. Strategic autonomy refers to the Union’s ambition to be able to act more independently in the world, especially in its immediate neighbourhood, by relying less on other powers and by strengthening its own diplomatic, military, economic and technological capacities. From this perspective, the South is seen not only as an area where the EU tries to export norms and support development, but also as a critical space for its own security, energy diversification, migration management and resilience against external interference. Comprehensive security means that the EU tries to connect military and hard security measures with civilian instruments, development cooperation, climate and energy policies, and support for inclusive governance and human rights. In the Southern Neighbourhood, this translates into attempts to combine conflict prevention, crisis management and border management with long-term investments in societies and economies. However, the effectiveness of this comprehensive approach depends on the EU’s ability to coordinate its instruments, maintain internal unity among member states, and balance the different – and sometimes conflicting – priorities that shape its engagement with this complex and strategically important region.

Questions

1. How is the EU's Southern Neighbourhood usually defined in geographical terms, and which sub-regions does it include?
2. What are the main types of political regimes found in the Southern Neighbourhood, and how do they differ from each other?
3. In what ways do state fragility and rule-of-law deficits affect the capacity of governments in the Southern Neighbourhood to provide security and public services?
4. How have armed conflicts and civil wars in countries such as Syria or Libya produced cross-border spillover effects for neighbouring states and for the EU?
5. What is meant by the term "youth bulge", and why is it a particularly important demographic feature of the Southern Neighbourhood?
6. How do high levels of unemployment and socio-economic inequalities contribute to social tensions and political instability in the region?
7. In what ways are migration, forced displacement and refugee movements linked to both human security and traditional state security concerns in the Southern Neighbourhood?
8. How do transnational threats such as terrorism, organised crime and trafficking connect security developments in the Southern Neighbourhood with internal security debates inside the EU?
9. What roles do regional powers such as the Gulf states, Türkiye, Iran and Israel play in shaping conflicts and alliances in the Southern Neighbourhood?
10. How have global actors like the United States, Russia and China sought to advance their interests in the Southern Neighbourhood, and how does this affect the EU's room for manoeuvre?
11. Why is the institutional landscape of the region described as "overlapping", and which regional organisations and initiatives illustrate this complexity?
12. How do the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and the Union for the Mediterranean complement each other in structuring the EU's relations with Southern partners?

13. In what ways does the EU Global Strategy reinterpret the Southern Neighbourhood within the broader concepts of resilience and integrated security?
14. How does the EU experience tensions between its goals of stability and security, and its commitment to democracy, human rights and the rule of law in the Southern Neighbourhood?
15. What is meant by “strategic autonomy” in the EU context, and why is the Southern Neighbourhood a key testing ground for the EU’s ambition to develop a comprehensive and autonomous security role?

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TOPIC 16: CONFLICTS OF THE REGION AND THE EU'S OPERATIONAL ROLE

- 16.1. *Typology of conflicts in the Southern Neighbourhood*
- 16.2. *The EU as a conflict manager: mandates and tools*
- 16.3. *Cooperation and division of labour with other actors*
- 16.4. *Effectiveness, constraints and lessons learned*

Overall goal

The overall goal of this topic is to provide students with a structured understanding of how different types of conflicts in the EU's Southern Neighbourhood emerge and evolve, and how the European Union responds to them as a conflict manager. The topic aims to connect the typology of conflicts in the region with the EU's mandates, tools and patterns of cooperation with other actors, and to encourage a critical assessment of the effectiveness, limitations and lessons learned from EU operational engagement.

Expected learning results

After studying this topic, students should be able to:

- Describe the main types of conflicts in the Southern Neighbourhood, including interstate conflicts, civil wars, proxy confrontations, frozen and low-intensity conflicts, and explain their humanitarian and regional spillover effects; outline the EU's main conflict-management instruments, such as diplomatic engagement, Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions and operations, and the use of sanctions, arms embargoes and other restrictive measures;
- Analyse how the EU cooperates and divides tasks with other international and regional actors, including the UN, NATO, the OSCE, the African Union and different regional organisations, and how member states and EU institutions interact in this field;
- Identify the main political and operational constraints that limit the EU's effectiveness, such as internal divisions, mandate limitations, host-state consent, resource gaps, risk-aver-

sion and unclear exit strategies; and evaluate key lessons for future EU engagements, with particular attention to the need for an integrated approach, prevention, resilience and local ownership in the design of conflict-management strategies.

Key terms

Typology of conflicts – a structured classification of conflicts (for example, interstate, civil wars, proxy wars, frozen and low-intensity conflicts) that helps to compare cases and choose appropriate policy tools.

Frozen conflict – a situation where large-scale fighting has stopped without a comprehensive political settlement, leaving unresolved tensions and a constant risk of renewed violence.

Spillover effects – negative consequences of a conflict that cross borders, such as flows of refugees, weapons, fighters, radicalisation or economic disruption, affecting neighbouring states and regions.

Civilian mission – a non-military CSDP operation focused on areas such as police reform, rule of law, border management or security-sector reform, aimed at strengthening state institutions and governance.

Host-state consent – the agreement of the government of the country where a mission operates, usually required for the deployment and functioning of EU civilian and military operations.

Local ownership – the principle that conflict-management and peacebuilding efforts should be led and supported by local actors, so that reforms and solutions are legitimate, context-sensitive and sustainable.

Resilience – the capacity of states and societies to withstand shocks, adapt and recover from crises and conflicts without collapsing into violence or systemic breakdown.

16.1. Typology of conflicts in the Southern Neighbourhood

Conflicts in the Southern Neighbourhood are diverse in form and intensity, but certain patterns can be identified. First, there are traditional interstate conflicts, where tensions arise between sovereign states over borders, resources or political recognition. Although large-scale classic wars between states have become less frequent, unresolved border disputes and military incidents continue to influence security calculations. Much more common are civil wars and internal armed conflicts, in which state authorities fight against opposition groups, rebel movements or armed organisations that challenge the existing regime. In many cases, these internal conflicts are transformed into “proxy” confrontations, where regional and global powers support different sides with money, weapons, advisers or direct military involvement. As a result, local struggles for power are closely connected to wider geopolitical rivalries and become more difficult to resolve.

Another important feature of the region is the presence of frozen, recurrent and low-intensity conflicts. Frozen conflicts are situations where open large-scale fighting has stopped, often after a ceasefire or informal arrangement, but no comprehensive political settlement has been reached. Violence is temporarily reduced, yet the root causes remain unresolved and the risk of renewed escalation persists. Recurrent conflicts are those that return in cycles: periods of relative calm are regularly interrupted by new waves of fighting, demonstrations or repression. Low-intensity conflicts may not reach the level of full civil war, but they involve frequent clashes, terrorist attacks, small-scale violence and structural insecurity that affect everyday life. In all these cases, the absence of a clear peace agreement and the weakness of institutions mean that societies live under constant uncertainty, which undermines development and trust in the future.

The humanitarian consequences of these conflict patterns are profound and long-lasting. Civilian populations often bear the brunt of fighting through deaths, injuries, destruction of infrastructure, disruption of health and education systems and the collapse of local economies. Large numbers of people are forced to flee their

homes, creating waves of internally displaced persons and refugees both within the region and beyond. Regional spillover effects are visible in many areas: neighbouring states face sudden population movements, pressure on public services and labour markets, and growing security risks related to arms flows, radicalisation and cross-border crime. For the European Union, these humanitarian and regional consequences are not distant problems; they directly affect EU migration policy, border management, humanitarian aid and security planning. Understanding the typology of conflicts in the Southern Neighbourhood is therefore essential for designing realistic strategies of conflict prevention, crisis response and post-conflict reconstruction.

16.2. The EU as a conflict manager: mandates and tools

The European Union acts as a conflict manager in the Southern Neighbourhood through a combination of diplomatic, security and economic instruments. In the diplomatic field, the EU engages in mediation and dialogue with conflict parties, often in close cooperation with the United Nations and regional organisations. The High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and the European External Action Service play a central role in this work, supported by EU Special Representatives who focus on specific regions or conflicts. These representatives help to maintain political channels of communication, facilitate negotiations, encourage ceasefires and support the implementation of peace agreements. In many cases, the EU does not replace UN-led processes but strengthens them by providing political backing, technical expertise and financial support to peace talks, monitoring mechanisms and confidence-building measures.

A second important set of instruments is linked to the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). Through CSDP, the EU can deploy civilian missions and military operations in its neighbourhood, if there is a legal mandate and agreement with the host country. Civilian missions focus on areas such as police reform, rule-of-law support, border management and security-sector reform,

aiming to strengthen state institutions and make them more accountable and effective. Military operations may contribute to stabilisation, maritime security, anti-piracy or the monitoring of ceasefires and arms embargoes. These missions and operations are usually limited in size and time, but they send a clear signal of EU engagement and can help create basic conditions for political dialogue and long-term reconstruction. Coordination with member states, NATO and other partners is crucial to avoid duplication and to increase the impact of EU action on the ground.

The EU also uses economic and legal tools as part of its conflict-management strategy, including sanctions, arms embargoes and other restrictive measures. Sanctions can target individuals, companies or sectors that are responsible for serious human rights violations, destabilising activities or the obstruction of peace processes. Measures may include travel bans, asset freezes, restrictions on financial transactions or limits on trade in certain goods. Arms embargoes seek to reduce the flow of weapons into conflict zones and to signal that the international community does not accept continued violence. While sanctions and embargoes are not a solution by themselves, they can increase the cost of aggressive behaviour, put pressure on elites to negotiate, and show solidarity with victims of conflict. Their effectiveness, however, depends on consistent implementation by all EU member states and on coordination with other international actors, so that targeted actors cannot easily find alternative sources of support.

16.3. Cooperation and division of labour with other actors

The European Union rarely acts alone in conflict management in the Southern Neighbourhood. Instead, it usually works together with other international and regional organisations and tries to build a division of labour that uses the comparative advantages of each actor. The United Nations remains the main source of political legitimacy and legal mandates for peace operations and mediation efforts. In many conflicts, the EU supports UN special envoys and UN missions with funding, expertise and diplomatic backing.

NATO plays a role when hard security and defence questions are central, for example in maritime security or in supporting partner countries' defence reforms; here, the EU and NATO are encouraged to cooperate closely, especially when the same European states are members of both organisations. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), although mainly focused on Europe and Eurasia, also contributes to broader security debates and norms that are relevant for the Mediterranean area. The African Union and sub-regional organisations in Africa are important partners in North African crisis situations, where African-led political and military initiatives can be supported financially and technically by the EU. In this dense institutional environment, the EU often positions itself as a provider of resources, norms and long-term engagement, complementing the more traditional security roles of other actors.

Inside the EU itself, conflict management reflects a complex relationship between member states and EU institutions. Member states keep their own foreign and security policies, embassies and military capacities, and they sometimes launch national or ad hoc coalition initiatives in the Southern Neighbourhood. At the same time, EU institutions – especially the High Representative, the European External Action Service and the European Commission – try to provide a common framework, a shared analysis and joint instruments such as CSDP missions, sanctions and financial assistance. When coordination works well, the EU can combine the political weight and military assets of its member states with the long-term programs, funding and technical tools managed at the EU level. This creates synergies and increases the Union's visibility and credibility as a conflict manager. However, differences in national interests, historical ties or threat perceptions often make it difficult to agree on a single line. In some crises, individual member states act first and only later seek EU support, which can produce overlapping initiatives or mixed messages to local partners.

These internal and external coordination dynamics are closely linked to the structural limits of EU hard power. Unlike a traditional great power, the European Union has only limited military capabilities under its direct control and depends on the willingness

of member states to provide troops, assets and political backing for any robust operation. As a result, the EU usually avoids large-scale combat missions and focuses instead on civilian crisis management and on supporting others' hard-security efforts. Its main strengths lie in areas such as rule-of-law support, security-sector reform, border management, training, monitoring and institution-building, as well as in the use of financial tools, trade policy and development assistance. The EU can offer significant funds for reconstruction, governance reforms and socio-economic stabilisation, and it can use conditionality to encourage conflict parties and governments to adopt certain policies. This model of power, which combines normative influence, economic incentives and civilian missions, gives the EU a distinctive profile as a conflict manager, but it also means that its impact depends heavily on cooperation with actors that possess stronger military capabilities and on the long-term consistency of its engagement in the Southern Neighbourhood.

16.4. Effectiveness, constraints and lessons learned

The effectiveness of the EU as a conflict manager in the Southern Neighbourhood is shaped by several political constraints. One major limitation comes from internal divisions among member states, which do not always share the same priorities, risk perceptions or historical ties to the region. These differences can slow down decision-making, weaken the mandate of EU missions or produce compromises that are vague and difficult to implement. A second political constraint is the legal and institutional framework under which the EU operates. Mandates for CSDP missions, sanctions or financial instruments are often carefully negotiated, with strict limits on tasks, duration and use of force. This can protect the EU from overstretch, but it can also reduce its ability to react quickly to sudden escalation. Finally, EU action depends on host-state consent: civilian missions and most forms of political engagement require at least minimal cooperation from the government on the ground. When local authorities are divided, illegitimate or uninterested in reform, the EU's room for manoeuvre becomes very

narrow and its instruments risk being used to strengthen existing power structures rather than to transform them.

Operational challenges further affect how EU tools work in practice. On the resource side, the Union has significant financial means but limited military assets directly at its disposal and often struggles to mobilise specialised personnel for civilian missions. Capabilities such as strategic airlift, intelligence or robust force protection depend heavily on a few member states and are not always available. Risk-aversion is another important factor: EU institutions and governments are generally cautious about taking on high-risk operations with unclear outcomes, which leads to mandates that focus on training, monitoring and support rather than on direct stabilisation under dangerous conditions. Exit strategies also pose a problem; missions are sometimes launched without a clear vision of how and when they should end, which can create pressure to “declare success” and withdraw before local institutions are truly resilient, or, on the contrary, to continue small-scale engagement for many years with limited impact. These operational constraints remind us that the EU’s capacity to manage conflicts is real but not unlimited.

Despite these limitations, several lessons can be drawn for future engagements. First, experience shows the importance of an integrated approach that connects diplomacy, security instruments, development cooperation, humanitarian aid and migration policy, instead of treating them as separate agendas. When EU institutions and member states coordinate better, they can create more coherent incentives for local actors and avoid sending contradictory signals. Second, there is a growing recognition that prevention is more effective and less costly than late crisis response. Investing in early warning, mediation, inclusive governance, socio-economic opportunities and human rights can reduce the risk of violent escalation and forced displacement. Third, the concept of resilience has become central: rather than promising quick “solutions”, EU policies aim to strengthen the capacity of states and societies to absorb shocks, adapt and recover. Finally, the EU has learned that local ownership is essential. Conflict-management efforts are more sustainable when they are designed with, and not just for, local actors,

when they respect local priorities and when they empower legitimate institutions and civil society. For the Southern Neighbourhood, these lessons point towards a long-term, patient engagement that balances ambition with realism and combines European interests with a genuine commitment to human security in the region.

Questions

1. How can we define the EU's Southern Neighbourhood, and why is this region strategically important for the EU?
2. What are the main types of conflicts present in the Southern Neighbourhood (interstate, civil wars, proxy wars), and how do they differ?
3. In what ways do frozen and recurrent conflicts create long-term instability in the region?
4. How do low-intensity conflicts affect everyday life, development and trust in public institutions?
5. What are the main humanitarian consequences of armed conflicts and state collapse in the Southern Neighbourhood?
6. How do conflicts in countries like Syria or Libya generate regional spillover effects for neighbouring states and for the EU?
7. Which diplomatic tools does the EU use as a conflict manager (mediation, special representatives, support for UN processes)?
8. What is the role of CSDP civilian missions in supporting police, justice and border management in the Southern Neighbourhood?
9. Under what conditions does the EU decide to launch military CSDP operations, and what are their typical tasks?
10. How do sanctions, arms embargoes and other restrictive measures function as instruments of conflict management, and what are their limits?
11. Why is cooperation with other actors such as the UN, NATO, the African Union and regional organisations essential for EU conflict management?
12. How do differences between EU member states' national policies and EU-level initiatives affect the coherence of EU action in the region?

13. In what ways do limited hard-power capabilities push the EU to rely on civilian crisis management and financial tools?
14. What political and operational constraints (internal divisions, risk-aversion, host-state consent) reduce the effectiveness of EU conflict-management efforts?
15. Which key lessons for future engagements can be drawn regarding prevention, resilience, integrated approaches and local ownership in the Southern Neighbourhood?

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TOPIC 17: THE EU AND THE ARAB–ISRAEL CONFLICT

- 17.1. *Historical background and basic parameters of the conflict*
- 17.2. *Evolution of EU positions and policies*
- 17.3. *Instruments of EU engagement*
- 17.4. *Challenges and controversies for EU policy*

Overall goal

The overall goal of this topic is to provide students with a clear understanding of how the Arab–Israel and Israeli–Palestinian conflicts have developed in their basic political and legal dimensions, and how the European Union has built its positions, instruments and dilemmas in relation to these conflicts. The topic aims to connect the main conflict issues on the ground with the evolution of EU policy, so that students can critically assess both the potential and the limits of EU engagement.

Expected learning results

After studying this topic, students should be able to:

- Explain in simple but precise terms the difference between the wider Arab–Israel conflict and the specifically Israeli–Palestinian conflict;
- Identify and describe the main core issues of the conflict, including borders, Jerusalem, settlements, refugees, security and mutual recognition;
- Summarise the main international legal and diplomatic frameworks, in particular key UN resolutions and the Oslo process, and indicate how they structure current negotiations;
- Outline the evolution of EU positions from the Venice Declaration to the present consensus on a two-state solution, and show how international law, human rights and humanitarian law shape EU discourse;
- Describe the main instruments of EU engagement, including political dialogue, economic and financial tools, and participation in multilateral formats such as the Quartet; and

- Critically discuss the main challenges and controversies for EU policy, including internal divisions, the balance between security and human rights, the impact of repeated cycles of violence and the debates on future options for EU action.

Key terms

Arab–Israel conflict – the broader historical confrontation between Israel and several Arab states, including wars, crises and gradual shifts towards peace treaties and normalisation.

Israeli–Palestinian conflict – the core conflict between Israelis and Palestinians over land, statehood, sovereignty and rights in the same territory.

Core issues / final status issues – the key questions that must be resolved in a peace agreement: borders, the status of Jerusalem, settlements, refugees, security arrangements and mutual recognition.

Two-state solution – the idea that peace should be based on two states, Israel and an independent Palestinian state, living side by side in peace and security with agreed borders.

UN resolutions – decisions adopted by UN bodies (especially the Security Council and General Assembly) that set legal and political parameters for the conflict, including principles such as non-acquisition of territory by force and a just solution for refugees.

Oslo process – the series of agreements starting in the early 1990s between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), which created the Palestinian Authority and introduced a step-by-step approach towards a possible final settlement.

Differentiation – the EU practice of treating Israel within its internationally recognised pre-1967 borders differently from the territories occupied since 1967, limiting the application of EU agreements and benefits to Israel proper.

Normative basis of EU policy – the use of international law, human rights and international humanitarian law as the main reference points for EU positions, statements and instruments in the conflict.

17.1. Historical background and basic parameters of the conflict

The Arab–Israel conflict and the Israeli–Palestinian conflict are closely connected but not identical. The broader Arab–Israel dimension refers to the long period of confrontation between the State of Israel and several Arab states after Israel’s creation in 1948, including a series of wars and military crises. Over time, this regional confrontation has partly changed: some Arab states signed peace treaties with Israel (for example Egypt and Jordan), and more recently a number of countries normalised relations through new diplomatic agreements. However, the Israeli–Palestinian dimension remains at the centre of the conflict. It focuses on the competing national projects of Israelis and Palestinians in the same territory and on the question of how to organise political control, sovereignty and rights between two peoples that claim historical ties to the land.

The core issues of the conflict are relatively clear, even if their solutions are highly contested. First, there is the question of borders: where the final line between Israel and a future Palestinian state should be drawn, and how to manage the territory occupied by Israel since 1967, including the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza. Second, Jerusalem is a central problem, because it has deep religious and symbolic importance for Jews, Muslims and Christians, and both sides see it as their capital. Third, Israeli settlements built in the occupied territories raise legal, demographic and security questions, and they make any future border more complicated. Fourth, the refugee issue concerns the fate of Palestinians who left or were forced to leave their homes in 1948 and 1967 and their descendants: whether they can return, receive compensation or be integrated elsewhere. Finally, security and recognition are crucial: Israel seeks guarantees against attacks and wants formal recognition from Arab and Muslim states, while Palestinians demand an end to occupation, freedom of movement and protection from violence.

International legal and diplomatic frameworks provide a basic reference for discussing these issues, even if they have not yet produced a final settlement. United Nations resolutions, especially

those adopted after the wars in 1948 and 1967, call for respect of international law, withdrawal from occupied territories and a just solution for refugees, while also affirming the right of all states in the region to live in peace and security. The Oslo process, launched in the early 1990s, created a more detailed framework for negotiation between Israelis and Palestinians. It led to mutual recognition between the State of Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), the establishment of the Palestinian Authority and a series of interim agreements on self-government in parts of the West Bank and Gaza. Oslo was based on the idea that a gradual, step-by-step approach would build trust and finally lead to a permanent status agreement on borders, Jerusalem, settlements and refugees. However, the process has suffered from violence, political changes and lack of implementation, and no final agreement has been reached. Today, these international norms and incomplete frameworks still shape diplomatic discussions and the role of external actors, including the European Union, in trying to manage and eventually resolve the conflict.

17.2. Evolution of EU positions and policies

The European Union's position on the Arab-Israel and Israeli-Palestinian conflict has developed gradually, from a relatively limited role to a more clearly defined political profile centred on support for a negotiated two-state solution. A key milestone was the Venice Declaration of 1980, adopted by the then European Community. This document was significant because it explicitly recognised the "legitimate rights of the Palestinian people", including their right to self-determination, and underlined that the Palestine Liberation Organization must be associated with the peace process. At the same time, it affirmed Israel's right to exist and to live in security. Although the European Community was not a direct mediator like the United States, the Venice Declaration marked the beginning of a more coherent European voice and laid the foundations for later EU policies. Over the following decades, this approach evolved into what is now the EU consensus: the conflict should be resolved through a two-state solution, with an inde-

pendent, democratic and viable Palestinian state living side by side with Israel in peace and security, and with a negotiated settlement of all final status issues.

The legal and normative basis for EU policy is rooted in international law, human rights and international humanitarian law. The Union repeatedly refers to relevant United Nations Security Council and General Assembly resolutions, to the principles of the UN Charter and to the inadmissibility of acquiring territory by force. It emphasises the applicability of the Fourth Geneva Convention to the territories occupied by Israel since 1967 and stresses the obligation to protect civilians in situations of conflict and occupation. Human rights norms, including civil, political, economic and social rights, are presented as universal standards that should apply equally to Israelis and Palestinians. This normative framing allows the EU to criticise violations by all sides while maintaining that a negotiated solution must respect both security concerns and the individual and collective rights of the populations concerned. In this sense, EU policy is not only a geopolitical position but also an attempt to project its identity as a normative power that links diplomacy with law and ethics.

A practical consequence of this legal–normative approach is the EU’s differentiation between Israel within its internationally recognised pre-1967 borders and the territories occupied since 1967, namely the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip. In general terms, the EU does not recognise Israeli sovereignty over these occupied territories and considers Israeli settlements there to be illegal under international law. Therefore, it has introduced technical and legal measures to ensure that its agreements and cooperation with Israel apply only to Israel proper and not to settlements. For example, EU–Israel trade preferences are limited to products originating inside Israel’s recognised borders, and specific guidelines have been issued on the eligibility of entities located in the occupied territories for EU funding. This policy of differentiation does not change the overall partnership with Israel as a state, but it signals that the EU treats the occupation as a temporary and legally distinct situation that must be resolved through negotiations. At the same time, the EU provides substan-

tial financial and political support to the Palestinians, including assistance to the Palestinian Authority and to UN agencies working with refugees, in order to keep alive the perspective of a future Palestinian state and to mitigate the humanitarian and socio-economic effects of the ongoing conflict and occupation.

17.3. Instruments of EU engagement

The European Union engages in the Arab–Israel and Israeli–Palestinian conflict through a combination of political, economic and multilateral instruments. At the political level, the EU expresses its positions through regular declarations by the Council and statements by the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. These documents clarify the EU’s view on developments on the ground, such as escalations of violence, settlement expansion, changes in the status of Jerusalem or steps affecting the peace process. Political dialogue with both Israeli and Palestinian leaders takes place in formal formats – for example Association Council meetings with Israel or meetings of joint committees with the Palestinian Authority – and in informal diplomatic contacts. Through this dialogue, the EU seeks to reaffirm the parameters of a negotiated solution, to discourage unilateral measures that undermine the prospects of peace, and to encourage respect for international law and human rights by all sides.

Economic and financial tools form a second major pillar of EU engagement. Israel is linked to the EU through an association agreement that provides a framework for trade liberalisation, sectoral cooperation and political dialogue, making the EU one of Israel’s main economic partners. At the same time, the EU is the largest donor to the Palestinians. It provides financial assistance to the Palestinian Authority, including budget support under strict conditions, and funds programmes for institution-building, rule of law, public administration, education and health. In addition, the EU supports Palestinian refugees mainly through substantial contributions to UNRWA and through humanitarian aid in times of crisis. These financial flows are designed not only to address immediate socio-economic needs, but also to maintain and strengthen

the institutional foundations of a future Palestinian state, in line with the two-state vision. Conditionality and technical assistance are used to promote reforms, increase transparency and improve the capacity of Palestinian institutions to deliver services to the population.

Finally, the EU plays an important role in multilateral frameworks and regional initiatives related to the conflict. It is a member of the Quartet on the Middle East, alongside the United Nations, the United States and Russia, and uses this platform to coordinate international efforts, support diplomatic initiatives and articulate its own approach. The EU backs UN resolutions and peace efforts and often finances or implements concrete projects that accompany political processes, such as support to security-sector reform, border management or confidence-building measures between Israelis and Palestinians. It also encourages broader regional initiatives that can contribute to a more favourable environment for peace, for example by supporting political and economic cooperation between Israel and Arab states within wider regional structures. Through this combination of political dialogue, economic partnership, financial assistance and multilateral engagement, the EU seeks to exercise influence not as a military power but as a normative and economic actor that promotes negotiated solutions, respect for international law and gradual conflict transformation.

17.4. Challenges and controversies for EU policy

EU policy on the Arab–Israel and Israeli–Palestinian conflict faces important internal and external challenges. One key difficulty comes from divisions among member states. Some governments have historically closer ties to Israel, while others express stronger sympathy for the Palestinian cause or for broader Arab positions. These different historical experiences, public opinions and security perceptions make it hard to agree on strong common statements or on tougher measures, for example on recognition of Palestine or on possible sanctions. As a result, the EU often speaks with a careful, compromise-based voice, which is sometimes perceived by local actors as slow, ambiguous or weaker than the positions of individ-

ual member states. This limits the Union's ability to act as a single, coherent diplomatic player.

A second set of controversies is linked to the balance between security concerns, the fight against terrorism and the EU's commitment to human rights and international humanitarian law. On the one hand, the EU recognises Israel's right to security and condemns attacks against civilians, including terrorism and rocket fire. It also designates certain armed groups as terrorist organisations and cooperates with partners on counter-terrorism measures. On the other hand, the Union insists that all parties must respect human rights and humanitarian law, including the principles of distinction and proportionality in the use of force, the protection of civilians, and the prohibition of collective punishment. In practice, applying these principles is politically sensitive: strong criticism of military operations or of restrictions on Palestinian rights can be seen by some as one-sided, while silence or weak reactions can damage the EU's image as a defender of universal values. This constant tension makes it difficult to maintain both credibility as a security partner and legitimacy as a normative actor.

Cycles of violence and repeated wars in Gaza and other parts of the conflict area also affect the EU's influence. Each new escalation produces high levels of suffering, destruction and political polarisation. In such moments, the EU often calls for ceasefires, respect for international law and a return to negotiations, and it increases humanitarian aid to the affected population. However, when the underlying political issues remain unresolved and the situation returns to a "no war, no peace" status, many observers question whether EU diplomacy and assistance really change the dynamics on the ground. The perception of limited impact, together with accusations of double standards or of insufficient pressure on the parties, can weaken the Union's credibility both among Israelis and among Palestinians, as well as in the wider region.

These challenges feed into debates about the future direction of EU policy. One option is to continue along the line of "principled pragmatism": defending international law and human rights, but accepting that the EU's leverage is limited and that progress will be slow and incremental. Another option is to use stronger condi-

tionality in relations with both sides, linking access to EU markets, funding and political cooperation more clearly to concrete steps on settlements, violence, governance and respect for legal obligations. This approach might increase pressure, but it also risks deepening tensions with key partners and may be difficult to sustain if member states disagree. A third, more modest scenario would focus on managing rather than solving the conflict, with priority on humanitarian assistance, support for resilience and small confidence-building measures, while keeping final-status issues on the long-term agenda. In reality, EU policy will probably combine elements of all three approaches, reflecting the Union's mixed identity as a community of values, an economic power and a cautious security actor in a highly polarised conflict.

Questions

1. How are the Arab–Israel conflict and the Israeli–Palestinian conflict related, and in what ways are they different?
2. What are the main “core issues” in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict (borders, Jerusalem, settlements, refugees, security and recognition)?
3. Why is the status of Jerusalem particularly sensitive for both sides and for the wider international community?
4. How do international legal and diplomatic frameworks – such as key UN resolutions and the Oslo process – define the main principles for a future settlement?
5. What was innovative or significant about the Venice Declaration (1980) in the evolution of European positions on the conflict?
6. How does the EU understand and promote the “two-state solution”, and what conditions does it see as necessary for such a solution to be viable?
7. In what way does international law, including human rights and international humanitarian law, provide a normative basis for EU policy towards the conflict?
8. Why does the EU make a legal and political distinction between Israel within its pre-1967 borders and the territories occupied since 1967?

9. Which political instruments does the EU use to express its positions on the conflict (for example, declarations by the Council or the High Representative)?
10. How do economic and financial tools – such as the association agreement with Israel and EU support to the Palestinian Authority and UNRWA – shape the Union’s role in the conflict?
11. What is the Quartet on the Middle East, and how does participation in this format influence the EU’s engagement?
12. How do internal divisions among EU member states limit the emergence of a single, strong European voice on the Arab–Israel and Israeli–Palestinian conflict?
13. In what ways does the EU try to balance its security concerns and counter-terrorism agenda with its commitments to human rights and humanitarian law?
14. How do repeated cycles of violence and wars in Gaza and other areas affect the EU’s credibility and its ability to influence the behaviour of the conflict parties?
15. What future options are discussed for EU policy – such as “principled pragmatism”, stronger conditionality, or more modest expectations – and what are the potential advantages and risks of each approach?

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TOPIC 18: TERRORISM, VIOLENCE AND RADICALISM IN THE REGION AND EU'S POLICIES

- 18.1. *Patterns of terrorism and violent extremism in the Southern Neighbourhood*
- 18.2. *Drivers of radicalisation and violence*
- 18.3. *EU internal and external counter-terrorism policies*
- 18.4. *Prevention, human rights and future challenges*

Overall goal

The overall goal of this topic is to help students understand the main patterns, drivers and consequences of terrorism and violent extremism in the EU's Southern Neighbourhood, and to analyse how the European Union responds to these phenomena through its internal and external counter-terrorism policies. The topic aims to connect security aspects with political, socio-economic, human-rights and governance dimensions, so that students can critically assess both the potential and the limits of EU strategies in preventing radicalisation, managing risks and supporting resilience in partner countries.

Expected learning results

After studying this topic, students should be able to:

- Explain the main types of terrorist and violent extremist organisations and networks in the Southern Neighbourhood and describe how they have evolved from local insurgencies to transnational jihadist movements;
- Identify and discuss the key political, socio-economic, ideological and digital drivers of radicalisation and violent extremism, including the role of authoritarian governance, exclusion, unemployment, corruption and identity-based narratives;
- Outline the core elements of EU internal counter-terrorism policy, with particular attention to strategies, information sharing, border controls and the challenge of foreign fighters and returnees;

- Describe the external dimension of EU counter-terrorism, including security cooperation and capacity-building with Southern partners, as well as the use of CSDP, development and ENP instruments to address both symptoms and root causes of radicalisation;
- Critically evaluate the main dilemmas and future challenges for EU policy, such as balancing security and human rights, avoiding counter-productive effects, responding to online radicalisation and lone actors, and designing prevention and deradicalisation policies that support local ownership and long-term resilience.

Key terms

Terrorism – the use or threat of violence by non-state actors against civilians or symbolic targets in order to create fear and achieve political, ideological or religious goals.

Violent extremism – attitudes and actions that support or use violence to impose radical political, religious or ideological visions, rejecting democratic dialogue and pluralism.

Radicalisation – a gradual process in which individuals or groups adopt extremist ideas and may come to see the use of violence as a legitimate or necessary option.

Transnational jihadist movements – extremist organisations and networks that promote a global, often religiously framed, struggle and operate across several countries and regions.

Drivers of radicalisation – a combination of political, socio-economic, ideological and personal factors (such as repression, exclusion, unemployment, corruption and perceived injustice) that can make extremist narratives attractive.

EU counter-terrorism (CT) policy – the set of strategies, laws and instruments used by the EU and its member states to prevent, detect, disrupt and respond to terrorism, including both internal and external measures.

Prevention and deradicalisation – policies and programmes that seek to stop radicalisation before it leads to violence, or to support individuals to leave extremist groups and reintegrate into society, often through education, community work and social support.

Human-rights and rule-of-law standards – legal and ethical principles that require counter-terrorism measures to respect fundamental rights, ensure due process and avoid discrimination, profiling and abuses that could be counter-productive.

18.1. Patterns of terrorism and violent extremism in the Southern Neighbourhood

Terrorism and violent extremism in the Southern Neighbourhood are shaped by a mixture of local, regional and global dynamics. The region has seen the activity of different types of organisations and networks, including locally rooted armed groups, long-standing Islamist movements with both political and military branches, and transnational jihadist organisations linked to global brands such as Al-Qaeda and the so-called Islamic State (ISIS/Daesh). These actors differ in ideology, tactics and objectives, but they often operate in the same fragile environments, compete for recruits and resources, and sometimes shift alliances over time. In addition, there are looser networks and “franchises”, where local groups adopt the name or narrative of a larger organisation without being fully controlled by a central leadership. This complex landscape makes it difficult for states and international partners, including the EU, to identify clear interlocutors or to separate purely criminal activities from politically motivated violence.

Over the past decades, there has been an evolution from primarily local insurgencies to more transnational jihadist movements. Earlier waves of violence were often focused on domestic regimes and national contexts, with armed groups targeting state institutions they considered corrupt, illegitimate or insufficiently Islamic. With the emergence of Al-Qaeda and later ISIS/Daesh, the centre of gravity partly shifted towards a broader global project, presenting the struggle as a fight against “far enemies” and international order as a whole. Conflicts and state collapse in countries such as Iraq, Syria and Libya opened new spaces for training, recruitment and territorial control, attracting foreign fighters from within the region and from Europe and other parts of the world. The use of modern communication technologies, especially social media and

encrypted platforms, allowed extremist narratives to travel quickly across borders and to connect local grievances with global ideological frames. As a result, terrorism in the Southern Neighbourhood cannot be understood only as a domestic security problem; it is part of wider transnational networks that link the region to other parts of Africa, the Middle East and Europe.

At the same time, the roots of violent extremism remain closely connected to local grievances and regional conflicts. Many individuals are radicalised in contexts marked by authoritarian governance, human-rights abuses, lack of economic opportunities, social exclusion and unresolved territorial or identity conflicts. Regional wars and occupations provide powerful images of injustice and victimhood that extremist organisations use in their propaganda, while weak state institutions and ungoverned spaces make it easier for them to operate. Global jihadist narratives give these local frustrations a broader meaning and present participation in violence as part of a larger, almost cosmic struggle. This interaction between the local, the regional and the global produces very diverse trajectories of radicalisation and makes “one-size-fits-all” solutions ineffective. For the EU and its partners, it is therefore essential to analyse terrorism and violent extremism in the Southern Neighbourhood not only in military or police terms, but also as a phenomenon linked to governance, development, identity and the broader security architecture of the region.

18.2. Drivers of radicalisation and violence

Radicalisation and violent extremism in the Southern Neighbourhood are driven by a combination of political, socio-economic, ideological and technological factors. On the political side, many countries in the region are characterised by authoritarian governance, restrictive political systems and limited space for peaceful opposition. Elections, if they take place, are often not genuinely competitive, and parliaments, courts and media do not function as effective channels for expressing and resolving social conflicts. When citizens perceive that corruption is widespread and that elites are not accountable, frustration grows. Repression of protests, arbi-

trary arrests, torture or collective punishment can reinforce perceptions that peaceful methods of dissent are useless. In such contexts, some individuals may begin to see violence as the only available way to challenge the system or to defend their community, which makes them more receptive to extremist recruitment.

Socio-economic drivers reinforce these political grievances. High unemployment, especially among young people and graduates, weak social mobility and visible inequality create a strong sense of marginalisation. Many young men and women feel that they have no realistic prospects for a dignified life, even if they invest in education. Everyday experiences of corruption – for example, having to pay bribes for basic services or jobs – deepen the feeling that the system is unjust and closed. This combination of blocked opportunities and perceived injustice can make radical narratives attractive, because they offer a clear explanation for these problems (“the system is corrupt, foreign powers are exploiting us”) and promise rapid, total change. At the same time, economic incentives may also play a role: in fragile environments, extremist groups sometimes provide salaries, protection or social services that the state cannot offer, which can influence individual decisions to join.

Ideological, religious and identity-based dimensions give these frustrations a language and a frame. Violent extremist groups in the region frequently use religious concepts to legitimise their actions and to create a strong sense of belonging and moral superiority. They present their struggle as a defence of the faith, the community or the “true” identity against external enemies and internal traitors. However, religion is rarely the only factor; it interacts with ethnic, tribal, national and sectarian identities, as well as with memories of past conflicts and perceived historical injustices. Narratives of humiliation and victimhood are central: they portray the community as under attack and suggest that only radical resistance can restore dignity and honour. This emotional dimension is important, because it transforms abstract grievances into powerful motivations for individual and collective action.

Finally, the digital space plays a crucial role in connecting these drivers and turning them into concrete processes of radicalisation

and recruitment. Social media, messaging apps and online forums allow extremist organisations to spread propaganda, share images and videos, and construct a virtual community that transcends borders. Algorithms and closed groups can create “echo chambers” where users are increasingly exposed to one-sided content that reinforces polarisation and dehumanises perceived enemies. Transnational recruiters use these tools to identify vulnerable individuals, maintain contact over time and provide step-by-step guidance towards involvement in violent activities, including travel to conflict zones or participation in attacks at home. At the same time, online environments make it more difficult for states and international partners to monitor and prevent radicalisation, because communication is fast, fragmented and often encrypted. For the EU and its Southern partners, addressing radicalisation therefore requires not only traditional security measures, but also reforms in governance, investment in inclusive development, support to moderate and credible voices, and smart engagement in the digital sphere.

18.3. EU internal and external counter-terrorism policies

EU counter-terrorism policy has both an internal and an external dimension, which are closely connected. Internally, the EU has developed common counter-terrorism (CT) strategies that aim to prevent attacks, protect citizens, pursue suspects and respond to incidents. Member states keep their own police, intelligence services and criminal laws, but they cooperate more and more through information sharing and joint instruments. Databases and alert systems allow authorities to check identities, travel histories and security risks at borders and inside the Schengen area. Border controls, including checks on air passengers and cargo, are strengthened to detect potential foreign fighters, traffickers and arms flows. The issue of so-called “returnees” – individuals who travelled to conflict zones and later come back to Europe – is a particular concern. Here, the EU promotes common standards for prosecution, rehabilitation and reintegration, while trying to balance security needs with human rights and the rule of law.

Externally, the EU works with partners in the Southern Neighbourhood to strengthen their capacity to prevent and fight terrorism, in ways that are compatible with international law and human-rights standards. Security cooperation can include training for police, border guards and judges, support for improving criminal legislation, and help in building specialised units or coordination mechanisms. Capacity-building projects provide technical equipment, expertise on financial investigations, and support for better control of borders and critical infrastructures. At the same time, the EU encourages legal and institutional reforms to make security institutions more transparent, accountable and subject to civilian control, because abusive practices by security services can themselves become a driver of radicalisation. Through political dialogue, the Union tries to promote a comprehensive understanding of counter-terrorism that goes beyond purely military or repressive measures.

To connect the internal and external dimensions, the EU uses a range of instruments, including the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), development cooperation and the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). CSDP civilian missions in the region often include components related to counter-terrorism and radicalisation, such as training in border management, support to criminal justice systems or assistance in security-sector reform. Development programmes address socio-economic drivers of radicalisation by investing in education, youth employment, local governance and social inclusion. Within the ENP framework, action plans and partnership priorities with Southern partners frequently include chapters on security and counter-terrorism, linking political dialogue and financial support to progress in these areas. In this way, the EU seeks to combine hard-security cooperation with long-term efforts to reduce the root causes of violent extremism, while keeping its own internal security strategies consistent with what it promotes abroad.

18.4. Prevention, human rights and future challenges

Prevention and deradicalisation have become central elements of EU and partner-country strategies in the Southern Neighbourhood. Instead of focusing only on repression and security measures, policymakers increasingly recognise the need to address the social and psychological processes that lead people towards violent extremism. Education is a key tool: schools and universities can promote critical thinking, media literacy and civic values, helping young people to question extremist narratives and conspiracy theories. Community-based initiatives – for example youth centres, local dialogue platforms, mentoring schemes and work with families – aim to build trust, offer alternatives to violence and create a sense of belonging. Inclusion policies, such as measures to reduce discrimination, improve access to services and involve marginalised groups in decision-making, are also part of prevention. Deradicalisation and disengagement programmes, inside and outside prisons, try to support individuals who want to leave extremist networks, combining psychological support, social assistance and close cooperation with local communities.

At the same time, any effective strategy must respect human-rights and rule-of-law standards. There is a significant risk that counter-terrorism and prevention policies may lead to abuses, such as arbitrary arrests, torture, broad surveillance, discrimination or profiling of certain ethnic, religious or social groups. Such practices not only violate basic rights, but can also have counter-productive effects: they reinforce feelings of injustice, humiliation and collective punishment, which extremist recruiters can exploit. For this reason, the EU emphasises that security measures must be based on clear laws, independent judicial oversight and effective complaint mechanisms. Training for police, intelligence services and judges often includes components on human rights, proportionality and non-discrimination. The challenge, in practice, is to maintain this legal and ethical framework under the pressure of real or perceived security threats, when public opinion and political leaders may demand quick and tough responses.

More broadly, EU policy must constantly balance different

objectives: security and stability on the one hand, and more transformative agendas related to democracy, human rights and social justice on the other. Short-term interests may push the Union and its member states to cooperate closely with authoritarian governments that promise control over terrorism and migration, even if their domestic practices contribute to radicalisation. In the longer term, however, sustainable prevention of violent extremism requires more open political systems, accountable institutions and fair socio-economic opportunities. This tension is at the heart of debates on the EU's role in the Southern Neighbourhood: should the Union act mainly as a security partner, or should it take more political risks to support deeper reforms that address structural causes of violence? In reality, EU practice often reflects a mixture of both logics, with results that are sometimes ambiguous.

Emerging trends add further complexity to these dilemmas. The rise of lone actors, who may radicalise largely online and carry out attacks with limited organisational support, challenges traditional intelligence and policing methods. Online radicalisation, driven by global social media platforms, encrypted communication and algorithm-based echo chambers, makes it harder to identify risks early and to control the spread of extremist content. Regional spillovers from conflicts in the Middle East, the Sahel and other neighbouring regions create new routes for arms, fighters and narratives, linking the Southern Neighbourhood to wider zones of instability. For EU strategies, these developments mean that counter-terrorism and prevention cannot be static or purely national. They require flexible, cross-border cooperation; constant adaptation to technological change; and a stronger emphasis on resilience – the ability of societies, institutions and individuals to withstand shocks without sliding into polarisation and violence.

Questions

1. How would you describe the main types of terrorist and violent extremist organisations active in the Southern Neighbourhood?
2. In what ways has terrorism in the region evolved from mainly local insurgencies to broader transnational jihadist movements?

3. How do local grievances and conflicts interact with global jihadist narratives in the process of radicalisation?
4. Why do authoritarianism, repression and lack of channels for peaceful dissent create a favourable environment for violent extremism?
5. How do unemployment, corruption and social marginalisation contribute to feelings of injustice that extremist groups can exploit?
6. What role do ideological, religious and identity-based narratives play in justifying violence and building group cohesion?
7. How does the digital space – including social media and encrypted messaging apps – change the way radicalisation and recruitment take place?
8. What are the main elements of the EU's internal counter-terrorism strategy, and how do they relate to information sharing and border controls?
9. Why are “foreign fighters” and returnees considered a specific challenge for EU internal security?
10. How does the EU cooperate with Southern Neighbourhood partners on security, capacity-building and legal reforms in the field of counter-terrorism?
11. In what ways are CSDP missions, development cooperation and ENP instruments used to address terrorism and radicalisation externally?
12. What kinds of prevention and deradicalisation initiatives (education, community work, inclusion policies) can reduce the appeal of violent extremism?
13. Why is it important that counter-terrorism measures respect human-rights and rule-of-law standards, and what are the risks if they do not?
14. How can the EU balance short-term security and stability objectives with longer-term goals of political reform and social justice in the Southern Neighbourhood?
15. How do emerging trends such as lone actors, online radicalisation and regional spillovers affect the design of future EU counter-terrorism strategies?

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TOPIC 19: THE EU AND THE SYRIAN CONFLICT: CRISIS MANAGEMENT, HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE AND RECONSTRUCTION DILEMMAS

- 19.1. *Syria in the EU's southern security environment*
- 19.2. *Evolution of EU policy towards the Syrian conflict*
- 19.3. *Humanitarian response, refugees and support to neighbouring countries*
- 19.4. *Stabilisation, reconstruction and long-term dilemmas*

Overall goal

The overall goal of this topic is to help students understand how the Syrian conflict has transformed the EU's southern security environment and how the European Union has reacted through diplomacy, sanctions, humanitarian assistance and support to neighbouring countries. The topic also aims to familiarise students with the main debates on stabilisation and reconstruction in Syria, and with the dilemmas the EU faces when it tries to combine crisis management, human-rights promotion and long-term regional stability.

Expected learning results

After studying this topic, students should be able to:

- Explain why Syria occupies a central place in the EU's Southern Neighbourhood and how the conflict has affected regional security, migration and terrorism;
- Outline the main phases in the evolution of EU policy towards the Syrian conflict, including political positions, sanctions, non-recognition of the regime's actions and support to opposition and civil society;
- Describe the scale and nature of the humanitarian crisis, including internal displacement, refugee flows and the impact on neighbouring countries such as Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan, and identify the main elements of the EU's humanitarian response;

- Analyse EU assistance to host countries and local communities, including programmes on education, livelihoods and resilience, and discuss how these measures are linked to broader migration and security policies;
- Critically assess the dilemmas surrounding stabilisation and reconstruction in Syria, including questions of conditionality, accountability, early recovery, engagement with the regime and the risks of “normalising” the conflict without a credible political settlement.

Key terms

Syrian conflict – the multi-layered civil war and regionalised conflict that has affected Syria since 2011, involving the regime, opposition groups, extremist organisations and external actors.

Humanitarian crisis – a situation of large-scale human suffering caused by conflict, including high numbers of killed and wounded, destruction of infrastructure, food insecurity and lack of access to basic services.

Internally displaced persons (IDPs) – people who are forced to leave their homes because of violence or disaster but remain within the borders of their own country.

Refugees and asylum seekers – people who cross an international border to seek protection from persecution, conflict or serious threats, and who request or receive international protection.

Humanitarian assistance – EU funding and operational support aimed at saving lives and alleviating suffering, delivered according to principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence.

Stabilisation – short- and medium-term measures to restore basic security, essential services and local governance in conflict-affected areas, without necessarily engaging in full reconstruction.

Reconstruction – long-term rebuilding of infrastructure, housing, institutions and the economy after conflict, often linked to questions of political settlement, accountability and who should finance and implement such efforts.

Conditionality – the practice of linking EU financial support, reconstruction assistance or political engagement to specific condi-

tions, such as progress on a UN-led political process, human rights or inclusive governance.

19.1. Syria in the EU's southern security environment

Before 2011, Syria was an authoritarian presidential republic dominated by the Ba'ath Party and the Assad family. Power was highly centralised in the presidency and in a strong security apparatus, with limited political pluralism and very restricted space for opposition or independent media. Society was diverse: the majority of the population identified as Arab and Sunni Muslim, but important minorities included Alawites, Kurds, Christians and Druze. Officially, the regime promoted a secular, pan-Arab identity, yet in practice access to power and resources was strongly shaped by loyalty networks and by the security services. Economically, Syria combined elements of a state-led system with gradual liberalisation in the 2000s. While some urban groups benefited from new business opportunities, rural areas and poorer segments of society suffered from unemployment, rising prices and the effects of repeated droughts. These socio-economic problems, combined with political repression and corruption, created a background of frustration that would later feed into the uprising.

The Syrian conflict, which started in 2011, went through several main phases and quickly became regionalised. It began with mostly peaceful protests demanding political reforms and an end to corruption and repression, inspired by the wider "Arab Spring" uprisings. The regime's violent response led to escalation, militarisation and the emergence of armed opposition groups. Over time, the conflict turned into a complex civil war, with front lines between government forces, different opposition factions and, later, jihadist organisations such as ISIS/Daesh. External actors became increasingly involved: Iran and Hezbollah provided support to the regime; Gulf states and others backed various opposition groups; Turkey intervened militarily in the north; and Russia's direct military involvement from 2015 changed the balance of power in favour of the government. International coalitions also carried out airstrikes

against ISIS. As a result, the war became a multi-layered regional conflict, with overlapping local, national and international agendas and a de facto fragmentation of Syrian territory into different zones of control.

For the European Union, the Syrian conflict matters for several interconnected reasons. First, Syria is part of the EU's Southern Neighbourhood and lies close to Europe's borders, so large-scale instability there has direct consequences for European security. Second, the war has generated one of the largest refugee crises in recent history. Millions of Syrians fled to neighbouring countries such as Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan, and many sought protection in Europe, contributing to the 2015–2016 “refugee crisis” and putting migration and asylum at the centre of EU politics. Third, the rise of ISIS in Syria and Iraq created a major terrorism threat, including the phenomenon of “foreign fighters” travelling from EU member states to join extremist groups and, in some cases, returning. Finally, the conflict has deep effects on regional stability, affecting Lebanon, Iraq, Turkey, Israel and the broader balance of power in the Middle East. It also poses difficult questions for the EU about how to combine sanctions, non-recognition of the regime's actions, humanitarian responsibility and long-term engagement in a context where a comprehensive political settlement remains distant.

19.2. Evolution of EU policy towards the Syrian conflict

At the beginning of the Syrian uprising in 2011, the EU still maintained a cautious engagement with Damascus, continuing elements of its previous neighbourhood and cooperation policy. However, as the regime responded to protests with escalating violence and large-scale human-rights violations, the Union progressively shifted towards political isolation and a clear “no-business-as-usual” stance vis-à-vis the Syrian authorities. Official contacts at high political level were reduced or suspended, negotiations on deeper economic and political cooperation were frozen, and the EU started to frame the Syrian leadership as primarily responsible

for the crisis. Over time, this evolved into a consolidated policy in which the Union refuses normalisation with the regime in the absence of a credible, inclusive political process, while keeping channels open for humanitarian coordination and technical dialogue where necessary to reach affected populations.

Diplomatically, the EU positions itself as a strong supporter of a UN-led political process as the only legitimate framework for resolving the conflict. It backs the efforts of the UN Special Envoy and the principles contained in major UN Security Council resolutions, in particular the idea of a Syrian-owned and Syrian-led political transition under UN auspices. EU declarations consistently refer to the need for a genuine political transition that includes constitutional reform and free and fair elections under international supervision, as well as to the importance of accountability for serious violations of international human-rights and humanitarian law. The Union does not recognise unilateral territorial changes produced by force, such as demographic engineering or forced displacement aimed at permanently altering the composition of certain areas, and it stresses the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Syria within its internationally recognised borders. In this way, EU diplomacy combines support for a negotiated settlement with a principled refusal to accept the results of military domination as a stable outcome.

Sanctions regimes and restrictive measures are a central tool in the EU's response to the Syrian conflict. The Union has adopted a broad package of targeted sanctions aimed at individuals and entities considered responsible for repression, violence or economic support to the regime. These measures typically include travel bans and asset freezes for officials, businesspeople, military commanders and organisations linked to human-rights abuses or to the machinery of war. In addition, sectoral sanctions restrict trade and cooperation in areas such as arms and dual-use goods, certain financial services, and specific parts of the energy and oil sectors. The stated aims of these restrictive measures are to increase the cost of continued repression, to signal political and moral condemnation, and to limit the resources available to finance the conflict, while at the same time avoiding broad measures that would fur-

ther harm the civilian population. The scope and list of targets are regularly reviewed and updated, reflecting both developments on the ground and ongoing debates among member states about the balance between pressure, humanitarian considerations and the possibility of future engagement in a post-conflict Syria.

19.3. Humanitarian response, refugees and support to neighbouring countries

The European Union and its member states have become some of the largest humanitarian donors in response to the Syrian conflict. Their assistance is guided by core humanitarian principles: needs-based aid, which means that support is allocated according to the severity of needs rather than political considerations; neutrality, which requires aid not to favour any party to the conflict; and the protection of civilians, which includes a strong focus on access to health care, shelter, food, water and sanitation, as well as on education and psychosocial support. In practice, EU humanitarian funds are mainly channelled through UN agencies, international and local non-governmental organisations, and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. This indirect model allows the EU to reach people in need on all sides of the conflict, even in areas where it has no political relations with the *de facto* authorities, and to maintain a clear distinction between humanitarian work and political or military objectives.

A second major component of the EU response concerns support to refugee-hosting countries in the region, especially Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan, but also Iraq and Egypt. These states have taken in millions of Syrians, which has put strong pressure on their public services, infrastructure, labour markets and social cohesion. The EU has created specific financial instruments and regional trust funds to help these countries cope with the long-term impact of displacement and to move from emergency aid towards a resilience approach. EU-funded programmes support basic services such as health and education, the rehabilitation of local infrastructure, and projects to improve livelihoods, including vocational training and job creation for both refugees and host communities. The goal is to

reduce tensions, avoid the creation of a “lost generation” without access to schooling, and provide alternatives to dangerous onward migration. In this way, humanitarian, development and stability objectives are closely linked.

The Syrian refugee crisis has also had a strong internal impact on the EU itself. The arrival of large numbers of asylum seekers from Syria and other conflict-affected countries around 2015–2016 exposed weaknesses in the Common European Asylum System and triggered intense political debates. Some member states accepted significant numbers of refugees and supported relocation and resettlement mechanisms, while others resisted compulsory quotas or limited access to their territory. National asylum and reception systems faced capacity problems, and tensions emerged between EU-level proposals for shared responsibility and national preferences for stricter border controls or ad hoc solutions. These controversies have influenced broader discussions on migration, integration, border management and the future design of EU asylum rules. In this context, the Syrian crisis became not only a humanitarian and foreign-policy challenge, but also a key test of EU solidarity and of the Union’s ability to combine protection obligations with internal political stability and public support.

19.4. Stabilisation, reconstruction and long-term dilemmas

In the Syrian context, it is important to distinguish between emergency assistance, stabilisation and full reconstruction, because each stage has different goals, instruments and political implications. Emergency assistance focuses on saving lives and alleviating immediate suffering: it includes food, shelter, medical care and basic protection for people affected by violence and displacement. Stabilisation refers to short- and medium-term efforts to restore a minimum level of security, repair essential infrastructure (such as water, electricity and hospitals), and support local governance structures so that basic services can function again. Full reconstruction goes much further: it involves large-scale rebuilding of housing, transport networks, schools, hospitals and the wider economy,

as well as long-term reforms of institutions. For the EU, the central dilemma is how to support stabilisation and early recovery in a way that helps civilians and prevents new crises, without sliding into unconditional reconstruction that could consolidate an unreformed and unaccountable regime.

This dilemma is directly linked to the EU's policy of conditionality, summed up in the formula "no reconstruction without a credible political process". The Union has repeatedly stated that it will not finance large-scale reconstruction in Syria as long as there is no meaningful, UN-led political transition that includes guarantees for human rights, inclusive governance and the safe, voluntary and dignified return of refugees. Supporters of this firm line argue that premature reconstruction aid would reward those responsible for massive abuses, strengthen authoritarian structures and risk turning the EU into a payer of war damages without any influence on the political future of the country. Others, however, call for more flexibility, suggesting that carefully designed projects in specific sectors or regions could improve the daily lives of Syrians, reduce incentives for onward migration and increase European leverage on the ground. The debate thus centres on how to balance humanitarian and pragmatic considerations with the need to maintain principles and avoid legitimising the outcomes of violence.

Questions of justice and accountability add another layer of complexity. The Syrian conflict has been marked by widespread violations of international human-rights and humanitarian law, including possible war crimes and crimes against humanity. For many victims and for parts of Syrian civil society, any sustainable peace must include some form of accountability, whether through international courts, universal jurisdiction cases in European states, or transitional justice mechanisms such as truth commissions and reparations programmes. The EU officially supports efforts to document violations, preserve evidence and strengthen international mechanisms for prosecution. However, pursuing justice can sometimes clash with short-term diplomatic efforts to reach ceasefires or political agreements, especially when powerful actors are implicated in abuses. The Union therefore faces continuous choices about how strongly to push accountability in its external action

and how to link justice discussions with broader peacebuilding and reconstruction agendas.

Looking ahead, several scenarios of EU involvement in Syria can be imagined. A “containment” scenario would focus mainly on limiting the negative spillovers of the conflict – such as terrorism, refugee flows and regional instability – with limited engagement inside Syria itself and continued emphasis on humanitarian aid and support to neighbours. A “selective engagement” scenario would see the EU expanding cooperation in clearly defined areas (for example health, education or local service delivery) and with carefully chosen partners, while maintaining political conditionality at the national level. A more ambitious scenario would involve a much more active EU role in rebuilding Syria, including substantial reconstruction funding and deeper political engagement, but this would require a major change in the political context and in member states’ consensus. In reality, EU policy is likely to remain somewhere between containment and selective engagement, constantly adjusting to developments on the ground and to internal debates about how to combine security interests, normative commitments and the long-term stability of the Southern Neighbourhood.

Questions

1. How would you describe the basic political system, society and economy of Syria before 2011 in very general terms?
2. What were the main phases in the evolution of the Syrian conflict from peaceful protests to a multi-layered civil and regional war?
3. In what ways did the Syrian conflict become regionalised, and which external actors played a key role in this process?
4. Why does the Syrian conflict occupy such an important place in the EU’s southern security environment?
5. How has the war in Syria affected refugee flows, migration routes and asylum pressures on the European Union?
6. How did EU policy towards Syria shift from cautious engagement before 2011 to political isolation and a “no-business-as-usual” approach towards the regime?
7. What are the main elements of the EU’s diplomatic position on Syria, especially in relation to the UN-led political process and the idea of political transition?

8. What are the goals and main characteristics of the EU's sanctions regime on Syria (types of targets, sectors, expected effects)?
9. Through which principles and channels do the EU and its member states provide humanitarian aid to Syrians inside the country and in the wider region?
10. How does EU support to refugee-hosting countries such as Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan link humanitarian objectives with resilience and development?
11. In what ways has the Syrian refugee crisis influenced internal EU debates on asylum, burden-sharing and border management?
12. Why is it important to distinguish between emergency assistance, stabilisation and full reconstruction in the Syrian context?
13. What does the EU mean by the principle "no reconstruction without a credible political process", and what arguments exist for and against greater flexibility?
14. How do questions of justice and accountability for war crimes and human-rights violations influence EU choices on engagement, sanctions and future reconstruction?
15. Which possible future scenarios of EU involvement in Syria can be imagined (containment, selective engagement, more active rebuilding), and what are the main opportunities and risks of each scenario?

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TOPIC 20: EU–EGYPT RELATIONS: SECURITY, GOVERNANCE AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC PARTNERSHIP

- 20.1. *Egypt in the EU's southern neighbourhood*
- 20.2. *Evolution of EU–Egypt relations: from association to “stability first”*
- 20.3. *Sectoral cooperation: economics, energy, migration and security*
- 20.4. *Governance, human rights and future options for EU policy*

Overall goal

The overall goal of this topic is to help students understand the place of Egypt in the EU's Southern Neighbourhood and to analyse how EU–Egypt relations combine security, governance and socio-economic partnership. The topic aims to show how historical association frameworks have evolved into a more explicit “stability first” approach and to examine the opportunities and tensions that appear in sectoral cooperation on economics, energy, migration and security, as well as in the fields of governance and human rights.

Expected learning results

After studying this topic, students should be able to:

- Explain why Egypt is a key actor in the EU's southern neighbourhood in terms of geography, demography, regional influence and security;
- Outline the main stages in the evolution of EU–Egypt relations, from the association agreement and early Neighbourhood Policy documents to more recent “stability first” priorities;
- Describe the main areas of sectoral cooperation, including trade and investment, energy and climate, migration management and security collaboration, and discuss how these areas serve both EU and Egyptian interests;
- Identify the main governance and human-rights challenges in contemporary Egypt and explain how the EU addresses them through political dialogue, conditionality and project-based support;

- Critically assess possible future options for EU policy towards Egypt, including the balance between stability and reform, and the search for a more coherent and values-based partnership.

Key terms

EU–Egypt Association Agreement – the core legal framework that structures political dialogue, trade liberalisation and sectoral cooperation between the EU and Egypt, forming the basis for a long-term partnership.

“Stability first” approach – a policy logic in which the EU gives strong priority to short-term stability, regime resilience and security cooperation, sometimes over deeper political reform and human-rights promotion.

Sectoral cooperation – practical collaboration in specific policy areas, such as trade, energy, transport, migration, security or education, often implemented through joint programmes, funding and technical assistance.

Migration and security partnership – the set of arrangements, dialogues and projects through which the EU and Egypt cooperate on border management, irregular migration, counter-terrorism and regional security issues.

Governance and human-rights dialogue – the part of EU–Egypt relations that focuses on rule of law, democratic institutions, civil society space and fundamental rights, usually expressed through formal dialogues and project support.

Conditionality – the practice of linking certain forms of EU support (financial assistance, market access, political upgrading) to specific commitments or progress in areas such as governance, human rights or economic reform.

20.1. Egypt in the EU’s southern neighbourhood

Egypt is one of the largest and most influential states in the EU’s Southern Neighbourhood in political, economic and demographic terms. Politically, it is a republic with a strong presidential system, where power is concentrated in the executive and the security

apparatus plays a central role in maintaining order and controlling political life. Political pluralism and the space for opposition and independent media are limited, while the state presents itself as a guarantor of stability and the fight against terrorism. Economically, Egypt has a mixed structure that combines a large public sector and state-owned enterprises with a growing private sector, especially in services, construction and tourism. Agriculture still employs many people, but its share in GDP has declined over time. The country faces structural challenges such as high public debt, dependency on external financing, and vulnerability to external shocks in energy and food prices. Demographically, Egypt has a very large and still growing population, with a pronounced youth component and rapid urbanisation. Big cities such as Cairo and Alexandria concentrate economic activity but also suffer from congestion, pollution and social inequalities, while rural and peripheral regions often remain underdeveloped.

Egypt's strategic location reinforces its importance in regional and global politics. The country controls the Suez Canal, one of the world's most important maritime corridors linking the Red Sea and the Mediterranean Sea and thus connecting Europe, Asia and the Gulf. The Canal is crucial for international trade, energy flows and global supply chains, and disruptions there have direct economic consequences for Europe and beyond. Egypt also borders Libya, Gaza and Sudan, three territories marked by conflict, political instability or humanitarian crises. Developments in these neighbouring areas affect Egypt's security and foreign policy, and Egypt in turn plays an active role in mediation efforts, ceasefire negotiations and border control. Its geographic position at the intersection of North Africa, the Middle East and the Nile Basin gives it a central role in regional diplomacy, security cooperation and energy and transport networks.

For the European Union, Egypt matters for several interconnected reasons. First, it is seen as a key partner for regional stability, both in North Africa and in the Middle East, and as an important voice in Arab and African politics. Second, Egypt is a significant energy and trade partner: it exports gas, hosts infrastructure for liquefied natural gas and aspires to be an energy hub for the East-

ern Mediterranean, while the Suez Canal is essential for EU trade with Asia and the Gulf. Third, Egypt plays a major role in migration management, as a country of origin, transit and destination for migrants and refugees from Africa and the Middle East. Cooperation with Cairo is therefore central to EU strategies on irregular migration, border management and search-and-rescue policies. Finally, Egypt is an important partner in security cooperation, particularly in counter-terrorism and in efforts to stabilise neighbouring conflict zones. At the same time, the EU must reconcile these strategic interests with concerns about governance, human rights and sustainable development, which makes EU–Egypt relations a complex mix of partnership, dependence and normative tension.

20.2. Evolution of EU–Egypt relations: from association to “stability first”

EU–Egypt relations are built on a legal and institutional framework that dates back to the 1990s and early 2000s. The central legal basis is the EU–Egypt Association Agreement, which entered into force in 2004 and provides rules for trade liberalisation, political dialogue and sectoral cooperation. Under the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), Egypt and the EU also negotiated Action Plans and Partnership Priorities that set medium-term objectives in areas such as economic reform, governance, security and people-to-people contacts. In parallel, Egypt participates in the Union for the Mediterranean, a multilateral framework that brings together EU member states and Southern partners to work on regional projects and dialogue in fields like transport, environment, energy and education. These instruments create regular institutional formats – association councils, committees and subcommittees – where officials meet, review progress and decide on future cooperation. On paper, they reflect a balanced partnership combining economic integration, political cooperation and shared responsibility for regional issues.

The 2011 uprising and the post-2013 political changes significantly affected this framework. During and immediately after the 2011 revolution, the EU revised its neighbourhood policy docu-

ments and promised a “more for more” approach: more support for partners that made progress in democracy, human rights and inclusive governance. In the Egyptian case, the period of political opening and electoral competition raised expectations that EU democracy-promotion instruments – support for civil society, electoral assistance, rule-of-law programmes – could play a meaningful role. However, the military takeover in 2013 and the subsequent consolidation of a new authoritarian order created a more difficult environment. Relations did not break down, but they became more cautious: the EU criticised human-rights violations and shrinking civic space in official statements, while at the same time maintaining cooperation in trade, energy and security. Financial and technical assistance was adjusted but not fundamentally suspended, reflecting the tension between normative commitments and strategic interests.

Over time, this experience contributed to a visible shift from strong democracy-promotion rhetoric towards a more “stability-driven” agenda in EU–Egypt relations. While official documents still refer to human rights, rule of law and inclusive governance as shared values, in practice the emphasis increasingly falls on stability, counter-terrorism, migration management, energy cooperation and macroeconomic reform. Egypt is framed as an “anchor of stability” in a volatile region, and this framing justifies close partnership even with a highly securitised domestic order. Critics argue that this “stability first” approach risks turning the EU into a primarily security and economic partner, with limited leverage and credibility on governance and rights. Supporters respond that, given regional turbulence and the scale of common interests, the Union has little choice but to work with the existing leadership while trying to keep governance and human-rights issues on the agenda through quiet diplomacy, targeted projects and conditionality attached to some forms of assistance.

20.3. Sectoral cooperation: economics, energy, migration and security

In the economic field, the EU is one of Egypt's main trade and investment partners. The Association Agreement provides for gradual liberalisation of trade in goods and, more selectively, in services, while also supporting regulatory approximation and customs reform. For Egypt, access to the EU market is important for exports of industrial products, agricultural goods and processed foods, and European companies are significant investors in sectors such as manufacturing, telecommunications, finance and tourism. At the same time, the structure of the Egyptian economy presents challenges: high dependence on a few revenue sources (for example, Suez Canal income, tourism, remittances and energy), a large informal sector and persistent unemployment, especially among young people. EU-Egypt economic cooperation therefore combines trade facilitation with support for structural reforms, small and medium-sized enterprises, vocational education and improved business climate, in an attempt to make growth more inclusive and sustainable.

Energy and connectivity have become increasingly central to the partnership. Egypt is an important producer of natural gas and hosts liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminals that can serve both regional and European markets. In the wider context of the EU's energy diversification and green transition, cooperation with Egypt covers not only gas, but also electricity interconnections and renewable energy projects, including solar and wind. There is a shared interest in developing Egypt's potential as a regional energy hub in the Eastern Mediterranean, connecting producers and consumers through pipelines, electricity grids and maritime routes. At the same time, the EU promotes policies that align energy cooperation with climate objectives, encouraging gradual decarbonisation, energy efficiency and investment in low-carbon technologies. Infrastructure and digital connectivity projects also play a role, linking energy, transport and communication networks between Europe, North Africa and the Middle East.

Migration and mobility form another sensitive and strategically important area of sectoral cooperation. Egypt is simultaneously a

country of origin, transit and destination for migrants and refugees from Africa and the Middle East. The EU and Egypt work together on border management, strengthening capacities to control irregular departures by sea or land and to combat smuggling networks. Discussions on readmission and return of irregular migrants are often part of this agenda, as are efforts to create safer and more regular channels of mobility, for example through scholarships, student exchanges or limited labour migration schemes. At the same time, the EU supports projects that improve conditions for refugees and host communities inside Egypt, focusing on access to education, health care and livelihoods. This integrated approach aims to reduce the drivers of irregular migration while respecting international protection obligations, although tensions can arise when security concerns dominate over protection and human-rights considerations.

Security and counter-terrorism cooperation has intensified in parallel. Egypt faces security threats in several regions, including attacks by extremist groups and cross-border risks linked to instability in neighbouring countries. The EU sees Egypt as an important partner in regional counter-terrorism efforts, maritime security and the fight against organised crime and trafficking. Cooperation includes political dialogue, information exchange, training and capacity-building for police, border guards and judicial actors, as well as participation in broader regional initiatives. In principle, this collaboration is accompanied by an emphasis on human-rights safeguards, rule of law and proportionality in security operations, because abuses and collective punishment can fuel radicalisation and undermine long-term stability. In practice, however, the balance between effective security cooperation and credible insistence on rights and accountability is difficult to maintain, and it is one of the central tests for the EU's ability to combine strategic interests with its normative commitments in relations with Egypt.

20.4. Governance, human rights and future options for EU policy

In its official discourse, the EU presents governance, the rule of law, human rights and support for civil society as core elements of its policy towards Egypt. These priorities appear in Association Council conclusions, ENP documents and public statements by EU institutions. The Union funds projects on judicial reform, public administration, women's rights, youth participation and the strengthening of non-governmental organisations. It also raises concerns about issues such as the use of emergency laws, restrictions on media and civil society, mass trials or the death penalty. However, the impact of this normative agenda is limited in practice. The political space for independent actors in Egypt is narrow, legal and administrative constraints on NGOs are strict, and domestic authorities often see external democracy-promotion activities as interference in internal affairs. As a result, many EU-funded initiatives operate on a small scale, with modest visibility, while the overall trajectory of the political system remains highly securitised and centralised.

These realities create persistent tensions between “stability partnerships” and more transformative ambitions. On the one hand, the EU relies on the Egyptian government as a key partner for regional security, energy, migration management and counter-terrorism. This dependence encourages a pragmatic approach that prioritises good working relations with the authorities and avoids measures that could seriously damage cooperation. On the other hand, the EU has committed itself to promoting human rights, inclusive governance and sustainable development, and it faces pressure from parts of European public opinion, parliaments and civil society to take a clearer stance on abuses and democratic backsliding. When serious violations occur, the Union is often caught between issuing strong critical statements and continuing high-level engagement in strategic sectors. This mixed approach can reduce the credibility of conditionality: partners may conclude that security and economic interests will always prevail over normative concerns.

Looking ahead, several possible trajectories for EU policy towards Egypt can be imagined. One option is to deepen sectoral

partnership even further, focusing on economics, energy, migration and security, while keeping governance and human-rights issues mostly at the level of dialogue and project support. This would reflect an explicitly interest-based approach and might produce tangible results in areas such as energy transition or border management, but it risks reinforcing perceptions of double standards. A second option is to move towards more conditional engagement, linking parts of financial assistance, political upgrading or participation in new initiatives more clearly to progress in specific governance benchmarks. This could increase EU leverage and consistency, yet it would be difficult to implement if member states are divided or if Egyptian authorities react negatively. A third scenario is more selective cooperation, where the EU concentrates on a limited number of priority fields and channels more support through non-state actors and multilateral frameworks, accepting that its ability to influence the central regime is modest.

Each of these paths has implications for the EU's credibility and consistency in the Southern Neighbourhood as a whole. If the Union is seen as prioritising stability and security in Egypt while applying stricter conditionality elsewhere, partners and observers may question the universality of its values and the fairness of its approaches. Conversely, if the EU chooses a more demanding line with Egypt, it must be ready to manage possible short-term costs in security and migration cooperation and to explain this choice as part of a broader, principled regional strategy. In any case, EU–Egypt relations will remain a key test of the Union's capacity to combine power and principles: how to act as a strategic partner in a turbulent neighbourhood while still defending a credible vision of rule-based, rights-respecting governance for the region.

Questions

1. How would you describe Egypt's political, economic and demographic profile, and why does this make the country a key actor in the EU's Southern Neighbourhood?
2. In what ways does Egypt's strategic location – especially the Suez Canal and its borders with Libya, Gaza and Sudan – influence EU interests and policies?

3. Why is Egypt important for the EU in terms of regional stability, energy security, trade, migration and counter-terrorism cooperation?
4. What is the legal and institutional basis of EU–Egypt relations (Association Agreement, ENP, Union for the Mediterranean), and how do these frameworks structure the partnership?
5. How did the 2011 uprising in Egypt initially affect EU discourse and instruments on democracy promotion and support for civil society?
6. What impact did the post-2013 political changes have on EU–Egypt relations, especially in terms of political dialogue and financial assistance?
7. How would you characterise the shift from a discourse focused on democracy and human rights to a more “stability-driven” agenda in EU–Egypt relations?
8. In what ways is the EU an important trade and investment partner for Egypt, and what structural challenges remain in the Egyptian economy despite this cooperation?
9. How does energy and connectivity cooperation (gas, LNG, electricity, renewables) contribute to Egypt’s role as a potential regional energy hub and to EU energy diversification goals?
10. What are the main components of EU–Egypt cooperation on migration and mobility, and how do these address border management, irregular flows, readmission and legal pathways?
11. How has security and counter-terrorism cooperation between the EU and Egypt developed, and what kinds of instruments and priorities shape this collaboration?
12. Why is it important for the EU to insist on human-rights safeguards and rule-of-law standards in the context of security and counter-terrorism cooperation with Egypt?
13. What are the main limits of the EU’s normative agenda (rule of law, human rights, civil society support) in the Egyptian context, and why is its impact often restricted?
14. How do “stability partnerships” with Egypt come into tension with the EU’s longer-term transformative ambitions for governance and human rights in the Southern Neighbourhood?
15. Which future options for EU policy towards Egypt can be iden-

tified (deeper sectoral partnership, more conditional engagement, selective interest-based cooperation), and what are the potential consequences of each option for the EU's credibility and consistency in the region?

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TOPIC 21: EU–LIBYA RELATIONS: STATE FRAGILITY, MIGRATION AND MARITIME SECURITY

- 21.1. *Libya's fragmentation and regional importance*
- 21.2. *Evolution of EU–Libya relations: from cautious engagement to crisis management*
- 21.3. *EU operational engagement and instruments*
- 21.4. *Migration, maritime security and normative controversies*

Overall goal

The overall goal of this topic is to help students understand how Libya's state fragility, internal fragmentation and strategic location shape EU–Libya relations, with a special focus on migration management and maritime security. The topic aims to connect Libya's domestic dynamics with EU crisis-management tools and policies, and to show how operational engagement at sea and on the ground generates difficult normative questions for the European Union.

Expected learning results

After studying this topic, students should be able to:

- describe the main features of Libya's fragmentation, including rival governments, armed groups and local power centres, and explain why Libya remains important for regional security in North Africa and the Mediterranean;
- outline the evolution of EU–Libya relations from limited and cautious engagement before 2011, through the NATO-led intervention and state collapse, to the current focus on crisis management, mediation support and cooperation with internationally recognised authorities;
- identify the main EU operational instruments in Libya and its surrounding maritime space, such as diplomatic initiatives, sanctions, Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions, border-management and capacity-building projects;
- analyse how the EU's role in migration control and maritime

operations in the Central Mediterranean is linked to broader aims of saving lives, fighting smugglers and protecting borders, and discuss why these policies are often criticised from a human-rights perspective;

- critically assess the main dilemmas and future options for EU–Libya relations, including the balance between short-term stabilisation and long-term state-building, and between effective migration management and respect for international and European norms.

Key terms

State fragility – a situation where state institutions are too weak or fragmented to provide basic security, services and rule of law across the whole territory.

Fragmentation of Libya – the division of the country into competing authorities, armed groups and local power structures, with overlapping external support and limited central control.

Crisis management – short- and medium-term actions to prevent escalation, contain violence and stabilise a conflict-affected context, often combining diplomacy, sanctions, missions and humanitarian support.

CSDP missions and operations – civilian and military deployments under the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy, used to support security, border management and maritime surveillance in and around Libya.

Central Mediterranean route – one of the main irregular migration and refugee routes from North Africa to Europe, crossing the sea from the Libyan coast (and neighbouring areas) towards EU member states.

Maritime security – measures to ensure safety and rule of law at sea, including search and rescue, control of shipping lanes, fight against smuggling and protection of critical maritime infrastructure.

Migration management – policies and practices aimed at regulating migration flows, border controls, returns and legal pathways, often combining security, humanitarian and development instruments.

Normative controversies – debates about whether EU actions, especially in cooperation with Libyan actors, are consistent with international law, human-rights standards and the EU's own declared values.

21.1. Libya's fragmentation and regional importance

Since 2011, Libya has moved from authoritarian rule under a centralised regime to a prolonged period of political fragmentation. The collapse of the previous system after the uprising and international intervention created a power vacuum that was not filled by strong, inclusive national institutions. Instead, competing governments, parliaments and armed coalitions emerged, each claiming legitimacy and control over parts of the territory. Formal political processes, such as UN-backed dialogue and attempts to form unity governments, have produced several interim arrangements, but they have not yet led to a stable, country-wide settlement. Local militias, tribal networks and city-based power centres continue to play a major role in security and in the economy, often controlling checkpoints, strategic infrastructure and access to resources. External actors support different Libyan factions with money, weapons and political backing, which contributes to a fluid and fragmented landscape in which authority is contested and the state remains weak.

Despite this fragmentation, Libya is an important energy producer and a significant player in regional economic and migration dynamics. The country has large oil and gas reserves, and its production levels have a direct impact on global and Mediterranean energy markets. Control over oil fields, pipelines and export terminals is a central element of domestic power struggles, but it is also a key interest for external partners, including EU member states that import Libyan energy. At the same time, Libya's long coastline and its proximity to Europe make it a crucial node on the Central Mediterranean migration routes. Irregular migrants and refugees from sub-Saharan Africa, the Horn of Africa and other regions often transit through Libya, where they depend on smugglers

and face high risks of violence, exploitation and detention before attempting dangerous sea crossings towards the EU.

The instability in Libya generates significant spillover effects for neighbouring countries and for the European Union. Weak central authority and porous borders facilitate the movement of weapons, fighters and illicit goods across the region, affecting security in the Sahel, Egypt, Tunisia and beyond. Trafficking networks use Libyan territory for smuggling people, drugs, fuel and other commodities, creating parallel economies and further undermining state institutions. Regional rivalries between external powers, who support different Libyan actors, also transform the country into an arena for broader geopolitical competition. For the EU, these dynamics translate into a complex set of risks: increased irregular migration and tragic loss of life at sea, potential terrorist transit or safe havens, disruptions to energy supplies and shipping, and the challenge of engaging with fragmented Libyan counterparts while trying to support a UN-led political process and respect international law.

21.2. Evolution of EU–Libya relations: from cautious engagement to crisis management

Before 2011, EU–Libya relations under Muammar Gaddafi were characterised by a mix of confrontation and selective cooperation. For a long period, Libya was subject to international and EU sanctions because of terrorism-related incidents and concerns over weapons programmes. Gradually, after Tripoli accepted responsibility for past attacks and took steps towards dismantling its WMD programmes, relations began to normalise. The EU engaged in cautious dialogue on issues such as energy, migration and regional security, and negotiations were opened on a possible Framework Agreement. However, cooperation remained limited and highly pragmatic. There was no Association Agreement and no full integration into the European Neighbourhood Policy; sensitive issues such as human rights, internal governance and the rule of law were only partially addressed. The partnership was thus narrow, focused mainly on mutual interests in energy and migration control, and built on a fragile understanding with an authoritarian regime.

After the 2011 uprising and the fall of Gaddafi, the EU initially tried to support Libya's transition towards a more open and democratic system. Assistance packages were prepared to help with institution-building, security-sector reform, border management and economic reconstruction, and political dialogue centred on elections and constitutional processes. However, the rapid deterioration of the security situation, the rise of rival political institutions and the escalation into civil conflict soon made this agenda difficult to implement. As the country fragmented and armed groups gained power, the EU shifted from a transition-support narrative to a crisis-management approach. It aligned itself with UN-led efforts to broker political agreements, recognised successive interim authorities endorsed by the UN, and used diplomatic statements, sanctions and technical missions to encourage dialogue and de-escalation.

In the current phase, the EU faces a context in which there is no stable, unified Libyan central partner that effectively controls the whole territory. Instead, the Union must engage with multiple actors: internationally recognised government structures, local authorities, security actors, economic institutions such as the Central Bank and National Oil Corporation, and a range of regional and international stakeholders involved in the conflict. EU action is therefore closely tied to multilateral frameworks, especially the UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL), and to coordination with member states and other external powers. This crisis-management posture combines political support for a negotiated settlement, targeted sanctions, and operational engagement through CSDP missions and border- and migration-related projects. At the same time, fragmentation and competing external agendas limit the EU's leverage, making EU-Libya relations a continuous exercise in adaptation, risk management and balancing between strategic interests and normative commitments.

21.3. EU operational engagement and instruments

EU operational engagement around Libya is most visible through missions and operations under the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), especially in the maritime and border-management fields. Maritime operations in the Central Mediterranean have had several aims: disrupt human-smuggling and trafficking networks, contribute to saving lives at sea, and help to implement the UN arms embargo on Libya. Civilian missions, such as those focused on border assistance, seek to support Libyan authorities in improving the management of land, sea and air borders. In principle, these missions combine technical expertise, training and equipment with political dialogue. Their achievements include better information-sharing, some reduction in certain smuggling routes, and more systematic monitoring of maritime activity. However, they face important constraints: limited access to Libyan territory because of security conditions, the fragmentation of Libyan institutions, the need for host-state consent, and sometimes differing priorities among EU member states about the balance between security, humanitarian and political goals.

In addition to CSDP missions, the EU uses sanctions and support for the UN arms embargo as part of its conflict-management toolkit. The Union has adopted targeted sanctions – such as asset freezes and travel bans – against individuals and entities seen as obstructing the political process, violating human rights or engaging in activities that threaten peace and security. EU maritime operations also contribute to the implementation of the UN arms embargo by monitoring and, when mandated, inspecting vessels suspected of carrying prohibited weapons or related material to or from Libya. Diplomatically, the EU works within UN-led processes, endorsing the efforts of the UN Special Representative and backing international conferences and roadmaps aimed at ceasefires, political dialogue and eventual elections. Through public statements and behind-the-scenes diplomacy, it tries to encourage compliance with ceasefire agreements, support institutional unification and promote an inclusive political settlement.

Cooperation on border management and capacity-building with Libyan and regional actors forms another important dimension of EU engagement. The Union funds and implements projects designed to strengthen Libyan coast guard and border agencies, improve information systems, and develop more effective procedures for managing migration and trade flows. At the same time, it cooperates with neighbouring countries and regional organisations to address cross-border challenges, such as smuggling, trafficking and the movement of fighters and weapons. Training programmes focus on technical skills, coordination between agencies and, at least in principle, respect for international human-rights and refugee-law standards. Yet, here too, constraints are significant: weak and divided institutions, lack of oversight, and serious concerns about the treatment of migrants and detainees in Libya raise difficult questions about how to ensure that EU-supported capacities are used in ways consistent with the Union's own norms. As a result, operational engagement around Libya is always a delicate balancing act between pursuing security and stability objectives and maintaining credibility as a promoter of rule-based and rights-respecting governance.

21.4. Migration, maritime security and normative controversies

Libya has become one of the most important transit and departure points on the Central Mediterranean migration route. Large numbers of migrants and refugees from sub-Saharan Africa, the Horn of Africa, the Sahel and, to a lesser extent, the Middle East travel through Libyan territory in the hope of reaching Europe. They often cross deserts and conflict zones, depend on smugglers, and end up in coastal areas controlled by different armed groups or local networks. From there, they are placed on unseaworthy boats or rubber dinghies and sent towards EU member states, mainly Italy and Malta. This situation creates a complex humanitarian and security challenge: on the one hand, there is a strong need for search-and-rescue activities to prevent deaths at sea; on the other

hand, EU governments seek to reduce irregular arrivals and to dismantle smuggling networks that profit from human suffering.

EU policies in the Central Mediterranean combine several elements: support for search and rescue, anti-smuggling operations and assistance to Libyan coast-guard capacities. Maritime CSDP operations and national naval assets have, at different times, engaged in search-and-rescue tasks, interception of vessels suspected of smuggling, and information-gathering on maritime routes. At the same time, the EU and its member states finance training, equipment and coordination systems for the Libyan Coast Guard and other relevant agencies, in order to increase their ability to patrol territorial waters, intercept boats and bring people back to shore. These measures are officially justified by aims such as saving lives, fighting criminal networks and restoring control over borders. They are often combined with projects inside Libya and in neighbouring countries designed to improve conditions for migrants and host communities, and with internal EU reforms of asylum and migration rules.

However, these policies have generated strong criticisms and serious human-rights concerns. Numerous reports have documented harsh detention conditions in Libyan centres, including overcrowding, violence, lack of access to basic services and, in some cases, exploitation and abuse by guards or militias. When the Libyan Coast Guard intercepts boats and returns people to Libya, questions arise about whether EU support indirectly contributes to *refoulement* – the return of persons to places where they face serious risks. Civil society organisations and some UN bodies have also criticised “pushback” practices at sea and the delegation of border control to third countries with weak protection systems. Inside the EU, debates on responsibility-sharing remain contentious: frontline member states demand more solidarity from their partners, while others prioritise strict border controls and externalisation of migration management. These tensions feed broader normative controversies about whether EU action in and around Libya is consistent with international refugee law, human-rights standards and the Union’s own values.

Looking to the future, several scenarios can be imagined. One possibility is a gradual shift towards more rules-based engagement, with clearer legal frameworks for search and rescue, stronger human-rights safeguards in cooperation with Libyan and regional actors, and more predictable mechanisms for disembarkation and responsibility-sharing within the EU. Another scenario is the development of broader regional arrangements, involving North African and sub-Saharan partners, to manage migration in a more cooperative and structured way, including legal pathways, protection in the region and joint efforts against smugglers. A less optimistic possibility is the continuation of largely ad-hoc crisis management, where responses are driven by short-term political pressures, partial agreements and reactive measures to new peaks in arrivals or tragedies at sea. In all cases, EU–Libya relations in the fields of migration and maritime security will remain a critical test of the Union’s ability to reconcile its strategic interest in controlling borders with its legal obligations and normative commitments in the Mediterranean.

Questions

1. How has Libya’s internal fragmentation since 2011 changed the way external actors, including the EU, can engage with the country?
2. Why is Libya considered strategically important for the wider North African and Mediterranean region despite the weakness of its central institutions?
3. In what ways do Libya’s oil and gas resources influence both domestic power struggles and the interests of EU member states?
4. How did EU–Libya relations under Gaddafi evolve from sanctions to cautious normalisation, and what were the limits of that cooperation?
5. What major changes in EU–Libya relations occurred after 2011, and why did the EU shift from transition support to crisis management?

6. Why is the absence of a unified central authority in Libya a problem for designing coherent EU policies and partnerships?
7. What are the main aims and mandates of EU CSDP maritime and border-related missions in and around Libya?
8. How do EU sanctions and support for the UN arms embargo fit into the Union's broader conflict-management strategy in Libya?
9. In what ways does the EU cooperate with Libyan and regional actors on border management and capacity-building, and what challenges does this cooperation face?
10. Why has Libya become a key transit and departure point on the Central Mediterranean migration route towards the EU?
11. How do EU policies on search and rescue, anti-smuggling operations and support to the Libyan Coast Guard seek to balance humanitarian and security objectives?
12. What are the main human-rights concerns linked to EU cooperation with Libyan authorities on migration control, especially regarding detention conditions and returns?
13. How do responsibility-sharing debates inside the EU shape member states' positions on migration and maritime operations in the Central Mediterranean?
14. In what sense do EU practices in and around Libya create "normative controversies" about the Union's adherence to international law and its own values?
15. Which future scenarios of EU-Libya relations – more rules-based engagement, broader regional arrangements, or continued ad-hoc crisis management – seem most likely, and what would each imply for EU credibility in the Southern Neighbourhood?

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